

Proper 10, Year C (RCL)  
July 10, 2022  
New Song Church  
Jane Stewart

Deuteronomy 30:9-14  
Psalm 25:1-9  
Colossians 1:1-14  
Luke 10:25-37

## Who is my Neighbor?

Competitive gymnastics was a huge part of my daughter's life when she was growing up. For every meet and every camp, it seemed that there was a t-shirt begging to be purchased. I remember one in particular, from a summer camp that she attended. It pictured a male gymnast, muscles bulging, arms outstretched, suspended in mid-air in the iron cross position on the rings, a female gymnast doing a handstand on the uneven parallel bars, and another doing a back handspring on the balance beam. The shirt proclaimed confidently, "You can do this!"

I don't think so.

Now, if the shirt read, "It CAN be done," I could concede the truth of the statement. Sure, I've seen it done. But "You can do this!?" Nuh-uh, no-way, no-how. Now, I know that I was not the shirt's audience, my daughter and other gymnasts were, but still . . . it seemed like an awfully bold assertion.

I have to wonder if the Israelites greeted Moses' words with similar skepticism. "The Lord will take delight in prospering you when you obey the Lord your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul." Then as if anticipating their unspoken questions, Moses adds, "This commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you," – "You can do this!"

"How?" they must have asked. "How can we be expected to keep these commandments?" But God has an answer for that as well. "Because I am going to be with you to help you. I will not only promise to faithfully fulfill my side of the covenant, but I'll also help you fulfill your side. I give you my word." "The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe." All you need to do is to listen to my voice. Trust me. You can do this!

Jesus, very helpfully, boils down the 613 laws found in Hebrew scripture to just two. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus speaks these words in both Matthew<sup>i</sup> and in Mark<sup>ii</sup>. "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets," Jesus says. In Luke, the same words are spoken by a teacher of the law and affirmed by Jesus. "You have given the right answer. Do this and you will live."

At this, the man starts to squirm. This test of Jesus had suddenly seemed to turn right back around to face him. Sure, he knows the answer to his own question. God's word was very near to him – in his mouth and in his heart. But can he *live* the answer? That is quite another matter. While the teacher of the law is clear on the letter of the law, he is less clear about the full meaning – the implications - of the law. So he asks Jesus another question. "Who is my neighbor?"

What I think he's attempting to do here is to take some of the sharp edge off of the law. After all, the requirement of the law is pretty stiff. So he looks for a loop-hole – to put limits on the law so that it isn't so seemingly impossible to fulfill. He knows better than to question the portion of the law which commands us to love God, so he goes for what he perceives to be the less stringent portion of the law – the love of neighbor. Again, he asks, "Who is my neighbor?" Or perhaps, to get to the question he's really asking, "Who is *not* my neighbor? What are the limits of love? How little can I get by with?"

Jesus responds by telling him a parable that we know as the Parable of the Good Samaritan. This is one of my favorites of Jesus' parables, so much so that it was the Gospel reading that Linda and I chose for our wedding. I know – interesting choice for a wedding – but I think what I love about it is the way it so radically expands our understanding of the love God calls us to have, not just for one another, but for everyone– love as expansive as God's own.

On the evening of the Supreme Court decision to overturn Roe vs. Wade, which was also the first evening of the Summer Ministries School and Retreat, Bishop Monnot released a statement to the diocese responding to the decision. A portion of her response reflected on her opening presentation that night at the Ministries Retreat. She had led everyone gathered in a session she called "Baptismal Ministry, St. Benedict, and Joy." Bishops statements on social issues are sometimes a bit ambivalent, because they know that the people of their diocese are likely not all of one mind on any given issue. There was no ambivalence here though. It was clear and strong and grounded in the faith that we share as Episcopalians as well as in our Gospel reading for today. As you may have read in the New Song newsletter.

Quoting our Bishop's words, "I spent the evening today presenting and reflecting on our call as Christians. One of the most basic calls we have is to love God and love our neighbor. One of the ways we phrase this in the Episcopal Church is in a promise we make when we are baptized: to 'strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.'

The dignity of every human being in the United States who is biologically capable of becoming pregnant was assaulted today. Our role as Christians is clearly laid out before us: we are to strive for the dignity of every human being. This includes human beings who are capable of becoming pregnant. Being opposed to abortion does not give anyone a right to treat another human being as unworthy of the dignity they deserve as a child of God. The decision to have or not to have an abortion must rest entirely with the pregnant individual and anyone they wish to involve."

As our bishop wrote, “One of our most basic calls we have is to love God and love our neighbor.” We love both God and neighbor when we work for justice and when we respect the dignity of every human being. The Samaritan showed love to the man who had been assaulted without regard for his personal biases or prejudices. He saw a man in need and he helped him. He did what love required. We are called to do the same, focusing our energies on the most vulnerable we see around us.

Right now, there are a lot of hurting, frightened, and angry people around us and probably including many of us – women who had thought they’d made progress in being acknowledged as capable of making decisions about their own health and the health of their families; trans and non-binary individuals whose rights and choices have also been taken away by the court decision, but who feel they are not seen or honored as part of those affected by the ruling; parents who want to protect their minor children from being forced to give birth to a child conceived as the result of rape; impoverished people who realize that they are not capable of providing for another child, especially given the steady defunding assault on social services that has destroyed the fabric of the social safety net; our Jewish friends whose belief that life begins with the first breath, means that their laws always gives precedence to the life of the mother over the potential life in her womb. The ruling denies Jewish people their religious freedom.

The command to love isn’t about race or religion, it is about having compassion for people in need, whether they need our ear, our comfort, our activism, or our money. As the parable shows us, love sometimes breaks the rules. It doesn’t always even follow common sense. Love sees someone in need, and, as able, responds to that need with compassion.

This kind of love comes to a Christian as the result of God’s incredible love for us, and as an outgrowth of our love for God. How could we love God with all our heart and soul and mind, without also loving the people God loves and has created?

It true that we can’t do it all. Most of us simply cannot possibly respond to all of the needs around us. But we don’t have to do it all. I believe that the commandment to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves, is a call to do what we can with the resources we have. It is a challenge to broaden our vision and to expand the present limits of our compassion. The Samaritan saw, not a despised, half-dead Jew, but a man in need of help that he was able to provide at that moment in time. And he responded. He did something.

Jesus says, “Go, and do likewise. You can do this.”

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 22:37-9

<sup>ii</sup> Mark 12:30-31