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**ACTION REQUIRED: 1. Love Unconditionally**

Colossians 1:1-14 Luke 10:25-37

We seem to be better at talking about what God has done FOR us and our salvation than we are at describing what God REQUIRES of us, expects of us. God calls us to a radically different way of seeing people, loving people, responding to people, treating people. Over the next few weeks our readings from Luke's gospel challenge us to act on what we believe, in ways fitting to the gospel, to change how we treat people going forward. In return for all that God has done for us, what does God expect of us? The story of Martha and Mary calls us to stop and listen to Jesus; the story of the friend knocking on the door at midnight asking for help calls us to be persistent in prayer, and at the rich man with full barns but an empty soul tells us to consider the fate of our souls. Today's action required is to LOVE UNCONDITIONALLY.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“Who is my neighbor?”

Both are loaded questions...and Jesus' answers confound the lawyer.

“*What must I do to obtain eternal life.*” Teachers cringe when we ask that type question. We ask “What do I need to do get an A? What do I have to do to pass this class? Will this be on the test?” Teacher's hate such questions because we're asking for the minimum requirement; just give me the formula to pass this class. They prefer to hear, “What will I learn? How I will I improve? How may I get the most out of this class?”

The lawyer asks about eternal life, and Jesus tells about the good Samaritan, showing that our obligation to engage in acts of mercy and mercy should include all people, not just select people. The lawyer asks his follow up question about who his neighbor is, hoping to qualify the ethical demands of the law. But Jesus' answer points out that the real issue is not *whom* we should serve but *that* we serve. The issue is not how we *see* others, but how we *act* toward them. Compassion is not just something we feel – it something we DO! Jesus turns the question back on the lawyer: Don't ask who your neighbor is, ask yourself *if you are being a neighbor*. Don't worry about the other guy – focus on being a neighbor to others.

When asked, “*Which of the three men do you think proved to be a neighbor?*” the lawyer answered, “The man who showed him mercy.” Jesus said, “*Go and do likewise*” and you will inherit eternal life...only the catch is you must do that all the time; for all people.

Love people, show them mercy, forgive the, help them.

That's the way God loves you, that's the way you are to love God:

You must love your neighbor, and love yourself, as God loves you...

**Do you love people that way, to that extent, all the time? Are you able to do that?**

Of course not, who can? None of us can love perfectly like that.

Nor can we perfectly obey the commandments; hence, the only way to inherit eternal life is to ask God's mercy, forgiveness, and kindness.

And because God perfectly loves you, God grants you mercy; forgives you, restores you, gives you eternal life through Jesus Christ!

"Who is my neighbor?" is the wrong question! Everyone is your neighbor!

The question is who are YOU? Are you neighborly?

It's sharing the love *that makes you* a neighbor.

The Samaritan is ceremonially unclean, a social outcast, a religious heretic. He is the opposite of the sanitized righteous lawyer, priest, and Levite. He's the last person the lawyer expected to be the hero of this story! This parable must have shocked the crowd, shattering their categories of who are and are not the people of God. God loves without prejudice, preference or partiality – and we are to love unconditionally, expecting nothing in return.

**"Love your neighbor as you love yourself." What does that mean in practical terms? How do we DO that? Let's start by say what loving yourself is NOT.** (Paul Eckle, 3)

**Loving yourself is not gratifying your every whim.** It's not giving into your every desire, every temptation, every wish, and every demand. Neither are you obligated to gratify your neighbor's every desire.

**Loving myself does not mean that I accept everything I do.** I fail, I falter, I sin. Nevertheless, I still love myself, I accept myself flaws and all. Loving my neighbor does not mean that I approve of everything my neighbor does or says. I don't have to pretend that my neighbor is perfect, or even pretend that he/she is better than he/she is or that he/she is nice when he/she is not.

**So, then what IS loving your neighbor? And yourself?** You love your neighbor when you choose to do what is best for him/her. Love is not just emotions, feelings, affection; it is action. It is choosing to act and behave in a ways that are best for others. It is doing things both small and large that help others.

**Here's a way to try it this week:** Pick someone this week – it doesn't matter whether you like him/her. Simply pick the person and *act as though* you loved him/her. Do something nice to help him/her. You may be amazed at what happens; you may come to like that person a bit more, and the more you like her the more you will help her, even care about her, understand him, respect him.

**But be careful! The opposite works too!** Do something unloving to that same person, treat him/her poorly, slight him, do her a bad turn, speak poorly of him, disrespect her, and sure enough, you will begin to dislike him/her more. And the more you dislike him, you more you distance yourself from him. That's why the Second Commandment- love your neighbor as yourself- is so important in everyday life. One small thoughtless act and it's twice as hard to

regain your ground and start over. But take a single step toward thoughtfulness and forgiveness and you may end up loving your neighbor as you never thought possible.

I think Jesus' parable shocked his listeners, especially the lawyer.

- The violence done to the traveler was shocking: he was stripped, beaten, robbed, left for dead in the ditch.
- The priest and the Levite, concerned about their safety and ritual purity, passed by on the other side.
- Then, most shocking of all, it is a despised Samaritan who, at his own peril, takes the chance of stopping to help. It is the hated enemy who proves to be the hero.

The point of the parable is not who deserves our care and help – but rather the ACTION REQUIRED of us: to love others unconditionally; to treat everyone we encounter, no matter how frightening, alien, naked, or defenseless – with compassion. *Go and do the same*, Jesus said.

“Who proved to be neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

The lawyer's answer...your answer...our answer makes all the difference...because it puts us in the ditch with the wounded man! You're never the same once you share ditch beside the road! Sometimes we're the beaten man.

Sometimes we're the priest or the Levite.

Sometimes we're the Good Samaritan.

Sometimes we're the lawyer.

Sometimes loving our neighbor is difficult and demanding, we must decide to love.

Sometimes we struggle to love ourselves.

This parable is not just about being nice and helpful, doing kind deeds.

It's about being wounded and vulnerable. Claiming our own pain and the pain of others.

We learn how to love our neighbor by entering the pain of the man who got mugged and tossed aside in the ditch. When you are down, when you are lost and confused, when you are in the ditch, then you know what it feels like to need a neighbor.

**In that experience of needing a neighbor you learn how to be a neighbor.**

**More than knowing the right thing to do, it's *doing* the right thing.**

Having God's love in your heart enables you to show compassion to yourself and to others.

When you realize how much mercy God has shown you, how much God has helped you, forgiven you, how can you still refuse to forgive and help others?

Our compassion must be practical, tangible help. No doubt the priest and the Levite felt pity of the wounded man, but they did not stop and help. Compassion, to be real, must prompt action.

**“Who is my neighbor?” Just look around. Your neighbors are all around you.** They sit in these pews. They live on your street, you go to school with them, you work with them, you see them in the store when you shop, and at the restaurants where you eat, and where you volunteer. Quite simply, your neighbors are all around you.

Loving, helping, showing mercy, makes us more like Christ.  
Demonstrating compassion is difficult, but the victories and the results are as amazing:  
needs are met, lives are saved, God is glorified, we become more like Christ.

Jesus ends his parable with a question, and then a simple command.  
“Which of these was the true neighbor to the man in need?”  
It’s a simple answer: “It’s the Samaritan!”  
Then comes the simple application: “Go and do likewise.”

The question that challenges me is not “Who is my neighbor?” but rather “Am I being a neighbor?” “Am I demonstrating compassion, am I showing mercy?”  
The onus is on me, not on those in need.

Sometimes we are the wounded one and Christ is the Good Samaritan.

We are the beaten and the beat down.

We are the broken and half dead.

We are the sinful in need of mercy and forgiveness.

Jesus is moved with compassion to help us, to rescue us, even to die on the cross to pay for our sins and to heal us and send us on our way again.

His mercy is extravagant! He is our living sacrifice!

And he asks the same of us!

Christ Jesus loves you!

He is calling to you - come to him, receive mercy! Receive the peace and joy he offers you!

**Then do the same the next time you see your neighbor in need.**

The ACTION REQUIRED of us is to love unconditionally.

It’s not about who your neighbor is. It’s about who **YOU** are.

**Are you being a neighbor?**

*(Hugh stood in silence, looking at congregation, let the message take hold, sink in...)*

*Amen.*

#### Sources

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