Stepping Into Their Shoes

This morning we’re going to look at a familiar story – the story of the Good Samaritan. It’s a story we all know – but sometimes we pay less attention to the interaction Jesus was having that brought it up. And it’s the context of this conversation between Jesus and a lawyer that makes this fascinating story all the more compelling.

We have a lawyer who wants to trip Jesus up, and he asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life Jesus, like any wise teacher, replies with a question – “What do you think?” Now, students, whenever you ask me a question and I respond with “What do you think,” you can now see and understand that all I’m doing is following Jesus. That’s my excuse.

This question that the lawyer lays at the feet of Jesus, and Jesus fires right back is this: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” -- That is a loaded question. Like so many places in scripture, something is lost when we seek to take a sentence written in Greek, in the culture of 2nd Temple Judaism, and translate it to English and transport it to the culture of 21st Century America. When we think of “inheriting eternal life,” we often think of “how we get to heaven,” but what the lawyer was asking was slightly different. His question, placed into it’s 2nd Temple Jewish context, would’ve been heard in this way: “how do I bring the reign of heaven to earth?” He was asking “how do I live to see the day when God truly resides in and reigns from the Temple? He was asking Jesus his opinion on a hotly debated topic in his culture. All of Israel was expecting a new age of God’s rule to come. They were anticipating the time when Rome would be overthrown, when God would return in triumph to the temple, and the blessings of God would flow out of Israel into the world. He, along with all of Israel, was anticipating, hoping for, working for the time when heaven’s rule would come on earth. They were anticipating the age when God would finally be well and truly King once and for all. They wanted to know how to make that happen. They yearned for it, and they all had different ways of getting there. They all believed that Israel had to do *something* in order to be the TRUE Israel. They had to do *something* in order for God to truly reign and the age of God’s rule to finally arrive. They had to do *something* to inherit life into the age of God’s reign.

Jesus responds to the challenge by throwing the question right back at the lawyer. And the Lawyer has a typical, packaged response for a lawyer in his time. The lawyer says that the key to establishing God’s reign is to fulfill the law. He says “Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, mind, soul and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.” The lawyer says “If we all fulfill the law with our lives by loving God and loving neighbor, then the age of God’s reign is here!”

Jesus then simply agrees. “Yep. Ya got it. Do that, and all will be well, the Kingdom will come, you’ll live into the age to come.” He just agreed. It seems like Jesus and this lawyer are on the same page – they both *believed* the same thing, fulfill the law, and God reigns on earth. But for the lawyer, that wasn’t quite enough. The text tells us that he wants to “justify” himself – the Lawyer wants to be “declared to be in the right,” to be truly on the side of God, and by contrast, to show that Jesus wasn’t justified; that Jesus wasn’t on the side of God.

It seems like the lawyer is splitting hairs – I mean both Jesus and the lawyer say that God will be well and truly King when we fulfill the law. But the lawyer has a hunch that he and Jesus aren’t quite on the same page. You see for the Lawyer, *belief* had to combined with *action carried out in a particular way*. For the lawyer, “loving your neighbor” means something fairly specific. The only way the kingdom comes is when *Jews love their fellow Jews and purify Jewish society through the law and the temple so that Jews could be the light of God’s love to the world.* For the Lawyer, you had to fulfill the law by loving God and loving Jews*.* It was about both *understanding that the law must be fulfilled* AND *understanding how you fulfill the law.* For the lawyer, the way you love God and neighbor is you turn inward, love the people that are like you, be the best version of yourselves. Be the best version of Israel.

The lawyer knows that Jesus, on the other hand, hangs out with the wrong people -- the tax collectors – those filthy Jews who had sold out to Rome; the Samaritans – those half-breed Jews who worshipped on the wrong mountain. Jesus may say that he *believes* the right thing, that the fulfilment of the law brings the Kingdom, but the lawyer knowns that Jesus consistently gets the other part of the question wrong. It’s not just about believing the law must be fulfilled. It’s about *how* you go about fulfilling it.

The lawyer knew that his neighbors were his fellow, upstanding Jews, who sought to follow the law, attend the festivals, and support the temple. Jesus, on the other hand lived like he loved tax collectors, Samaritans, and Gentiles. And if the lawyer could Jesus to publicly admit that little bit of heresy, then he could end this whole Jesus thing. We have to understand that in the eyes of the lawyer, this whole Jesus thing was becoming a problem – how would the reign of God ever come in Israel if there were Jews hanging out with tax collectors and Samaritans?

So he backs Jesus into a corner. The lawyer asks Jesus “who then is my neighbor?” Jesus seemingly has two possible responses. Either he says that “only the Jews are our neighbors,” and therefore throws his whole ministry to the outcasts out the window, or he publicly admits that he disagrees with what is accepted across the board as the status quo: that Jews are to love Jews so that Jewish society can be perfected and the reign of God can come.

So what will Jesus do? Will he dare put lowly Samaritans, Gentiles, and tax collectors on the same level as upstanding Jews, and publicly commit heresy? Will he dare throw them all under the bus, and cut his own ministry off at its knees? Who, according to Jesus, is the neighbor that must be loved?

Jesus answers with a masterful story. It’s a story that redraws the lines of the Kingdom, it’s a story we all know. A Jewish man is headed to Jericho. There are a couple of ways to get there – a winding, lonely road – dangerous to travel alone, or directly through Samaria – the land of those dirty Samaritans. No good Jew would be caught in Samaria, especially not alone, that would be terrible for your reputation. The man decides to take the winding Jericho road to preserve his purity. Unfortunately, travelling alone along any road was dangerous, and he’s mugged, beaten, robbed, and left for dead.

Along comes a priest. The priest is on his way to the Temple. He has work to do; sacrifices to offer; tithes to collect. He isn’t sure if this man is dead, but he can’t take the risk; it’ll leave him ritually unclean, and he won’t be able to perform his duties. Assuming the man must be dead and deciding that his ritual duties for ALL of Israel were more important than this guy even if he is living, he skirts around the beaten man, turns his eyes away, and heads toward the temple; pushing thoughts of what he could have done out of his mind, in exchange for thoughts of his holy duties, as a priest, and the ministry he would soon perform. He feels some sympathy for the guy, but soon forces the feelings away. He encourages himself, and soon forgets about the beaten man. In much the same way, thinking along many of the same lines, a Levite comes by, another official who simply cannot risk the ritual impurity that comes from touching a dead man or the blood of another; he too, skirts around the edge, turns his eyes and his mind away, and heads toward his duties. He feels some sympathy for the guy, but soon pushes the feelings away.

Next comes along a Samaritan, a lowly Samaritan, who worships on the wrong mountain, is not an ethnically pure Jew; who thinks he worships God, but as any good Jew knows, is really on the outside looking in; this Samaritan wasn’t born in the right place or to the right people, this Samaritan is the epitome of who the lawyer despises – he might can say the right things or believe the right things, but he’ll never be the right person. This despised Samaritan comes across this broken Jewish man, kneels down, and cleans his wounds; lifts him to his own donkey, takes him to an inn, pays for his stay and for him to be nursed back to health, and plans to come back later to pay off any further debt. The Samaritan cares for the man that the Jewish officials ignored. The Samaritan empathized with the man. He felt the broken man’s pain, and he acted on it.

Jesus, after completing his story, knows that he has done something scandalous. He has made the Samaritan in the story the one who loves his neighbor as himself. The story didn’t show a Jew loving a Samaritan as a neighbor, which would have been scandalous enough. No, the story shows a Samaritan loving *Jew* as a neighbor. According to this story, not only can Samaritans be the neighbors that we are called to love, but Samaritans can be the ones who do the loving.

Jesus turns back to the lawyer and asks him one more question: “Who was the neighbor to this beaten man?” And the only thing the Lawyer can do is admit that it was the Samaritan. The Samaritan had been a neighbor. The Samaritan had fulfilled the law, while the priest, and the Levite had failed.

So how does Jesus work his way out of the corner? Rather than throwing the outcasts under the bus by toeing the company line; rather than judging his fellow Jews for being closeminded about Samaritans and turning them away judgmentally, Jesus takes the time to tell a story. And this story forces the lawyer, and everyone else there, to expand their worldview.

Perhaps the age of God’s reign is not about the right people, Jews, loving the right people, Jews. Maybe, just maybe, the age to come is more compelling than that. Maybe it’s about more than just the Jews getting it right; maybe it’s about the whole world loving their neighbors, and insodoing filling the earth with God’s goodness, glory, and love.

Jesus re-drew the lines. God’s reign is here when *all people love all people.* And brothers and sisters, that has not changed to this very day. God is well and truly King when we love God and show that love by loving our neighbors, regardless of who they are. I often say that the reign and rule and Kingdom of God goes only as far as we take it. And friends, we take the Kingdom only as far as we love our neighbors.

So where do we begin? How do we make that happen? How do we love our neighbors? How do we take the Kingdom ever further?

In the story Jesus told, the Samaritan had something that the priest and the Levite did not. He had empathy. He looked upon a Jew and saw not a Jew but saw suffering. He looked upon a social “enemy” and saw a brother. He looked upon a broken human and saw suffering. He empathized. He empathized, which is different from sympathized. He did not just feel sorry for the dude and then continue on his merry way like the priest and Levite, who were too distracted by their important duties to really care. No, this Samaritan took on the broken man’s feelings of hurt and shame, and he loved his neighbor as himself. The Samaritan stepped into the beaten man’s shoes and imagined what he would do for himself if it was him, laying on the side of the road, bloodied and broken.

If his own body had been broken, he would have sought healing. So what does he do for the body of this broken man? He cares for it, he handles the financial cost; he loves his neighbor. And that is empathy. Empathy is not only “feeling sorry for;” then going about our important duties; empathy is “taking on the feelings of another, and acting on it.” Empathy means removing your own perspective and looking at the world through the lenses of someone else, then acting upon it.

Empathy is played out in so many different ways! We could spend hours talking about it. Empathy is stepping into someone else’s shoes, seeing the world from their perspective, and acting with them to make their lives, our lives, and the world a better place. Empathy happens when we take our eyes off of our own lives long enough to see the reality that others are living through, stepping into their shoes, and helping them live it. The most powerful example of empathy known to the human story is the empathy that God showed us by walking among us in the person of Jesus. God saw a broken world, and he didn’t just judge it. He didn’t throw us under the bus. He became like us, he showed us the way. He healed the sick. He restored the outcasts, he mended the broken. He became one of us, felt we felt, took our hands, and set us free. Now, we are called to do the same. Jesus didn’t gather a massive following by turning inward, by making the club exclusive, by being the judge. Jesus gathered a massive following because he lived an empathetic life. And that, my friends, is compelling.

I am grateful to be part of a church that is empathetic. In a week or two, we will put together a team who will go towards the coast and respond to a terrible natural disaster. We do that because we feel the pain of the victims. We try to imagine what it would be like to lose everything, and we decide to do for others what we would do for ourselves; seeking to take their hands and help set them free from disaster to fill the earth with God’s love yet again. Thank you for being an empathetic church!

Because if we want to see the Kingdom of God come, if we want to inherit life into the age of God’s reign and bring the Kingdom of heaven to earth, we have to follow in the way of Jesus and love our neighbors as ourselves. We have to have empathy.

We have to step into someone else’s shoes. So this is our challenge this week: find someone you disagree with, and rather than following in the way of the world and starting a social media argument, instead step into their shoes and find common ground. Find someone in pain and difficulty, and do for them what you would do for yourself if you were in their shoes. Find someone much older or younger than you, listen to their story, seek to understand them. Find someone who believes differently than you – in whatever way, and empathize. Step into their shoes. See the world from their perspective. Why? Because when Jesus is Lord, this – loving God and neighbor – empathizing with people of all stripes is simply what we do. When Jesus is Lord, this – stepping into someone else’s shoes – this is us.

Join me in prayer.