

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Helen and I were down to St. Louis for the past three days to attend the funeral of a friend who died in May in her 90<sup>th</sup> year of life, and also to visit my parents and children. My parent still live in the house we moved into 55 years ago this month, and we were reminiscing about the neighborhood, and how it had changed over the years. At one point we were driving past the house of one of my grade-school friends, which we do all the time since it's on the main road, but this time we had to wait for someone who was pulling into the driveway there. That caused me to notice that it was this friend's house, and to remember a conversation we had one time sitting on the hill next to her house that led up to the Lutheran church that we would probably have gone to if my dad had not had a part-time call to a different Lutheran church half an hour away. I think my oldest sister was with us too, because the three of us used to hang out together. Anyway, this friend was a Roman Catholic, so we sometimes talked about our churches and how they were the same and how they were different. On the particular occasion that I was reminded of, though, we started out by talking about other things. I don't remember the specifics, but we were talking about other kids at school (like you do when you're kids), when my friend said about someone, "I hate him." I remember being startled by that, and maybe I said something, or maybe my sister did, or maybe we didn't and our friend just caught herself and qualified what she had just said. "Well," she said, "in *God's* way I *don't* hate him, but in *my* way I do." I don't remember anything else about that conversation, but her qualification stuck with me. In retrospect I see it as a great example of recognizing the discrepancy between how we know we're *supposed* to relate to others and how we actually *do* relate to them. It's also a good example of how even grade-schoolers are already doing theology. Our friend knew that *God* loves everyone, but she also knew that she *didn't* love everyone. But she knew that she was *supposed* to love everyone, so maybe there was a way of doing that – *God's* way – that also let her continue to feel how she felt, so she could do both at the same time.

I bring that up because it came to mind as I was also thinking about this week's Gospel reading and the lawyer who approaches Jesus with a tricky question. His first question isn't tricky, though. It's straightforward. "What must I do to be in *God's* good graces, to be in right relationship with *God*?" – to "inherit eternal life" is how he puts it. It's a question he knows the answer to because all Jewish people knew the answer: Love *God* and love your neighbor. These were the greatest commandments. Jesus didn't make that up. Everybody knew it, even a child, like our grade-school friend knew the basic teachings of Jesus. Now comes the tricky part. Loving *God* is one thing. It seems doable. In fact, loving *God* is pretty easy, especially if you can remake *God* in your own image, if you can imagine that *God* is who you want *God* to be, that *God* wants what you want, loves who you love, and hates who you hate. But Jesus has been pushing the envelope with that second part, the part about loving the neighbor. He has been proclaiming and embodying *God's* love and mercy to some pretty unsavory characters – "tax collectors and sinners" is the term that Luke uses repeatedly in his Gospel. Jesus keeps hanging out with those sorts of people, something that a good, respectable, righteous person wouldn't do in this social and religious context. And it rubs people like the scribes and the Pharisees – and this lawyer – the wrong way. I should note here that this isn't quite a lawyer in our modern sense of the word. He is an expert in Jewish religious law who thinks he knows the answer to his question and is trying to trick Jesus into saying something that will discredit him. So he is a character like the scribes and the Pharisees, and what I always say about Pharisees applies to this lawyer too: if you don't identify yourself with the lawyer

in this story, if you don't see his question as the kind of question you might ask, you might be missing the point of this story, and of Jesus' parable, which I'll get to in a minute. But first, it's crucial for us to see that the lawyer's question arises out of the same awareness that our grade-school friend had. He knows that God requires him to love his neighbor, but neighbor does not mean "everybody," it means particular people, literally "those who are near," both in English and in the original languages of this story. So there are limits to the commandment, and the lawyer wants Jesus to say what those limits are. Like my friend, he knows that he doesn't love everyone, and he wants that to be okay with God. That's what Luke means by saying that he wanted to "justify" himself. His question amounts to this: "Whom do I absolutely *have* to love, and whom will God allow me to hate?"

Jesus answers by telling a story. In my children's sermon, I talked about the different characters in the story, and how the person who ended up being helpful was the person you would least expect or want to be helpful, someone you thought of as an enemy. Jesus turns the question around on the lawyer and makes him think about not who it would be acceptable to hate, or at least to not have to love, but instead who it would be acceptable to accept help *from*. If *you* were robbed and beaten up, stripped naked and left half dead, who would it be okay to be helped by? And in that moment when your life was on the line, would it matter who that person was – what team he was on, what color his skin was, what language he spoke, what his politics were? I'm saying it's a he, but what if it's a she, or what if it's someone who doesn't like the he/she duality and understands themselves to be non-binary? Would it be acceptable to receive life-saving help from *that* kind of a person? Could you imagine Jesus telling the story that way, and does that thought offend you? If so, you might be getting Jesus' point here.

Now I'm going to acknowledge that for some people, even in such extreme circumstances, it would *absolutely* matter who was offering to help. There are some people who would rather die than change their mind about people and ideas they despise. Jonah was one of those people in my favorite book of the Bible. He was so angry that God had had mercy on the people that he hated that he wanted to die. There are people who died from COVID believing that it was a hoax, and refusing treatment that could have saved their life, until it was too late. For most of us it's easy to see the absurdity of people like Jonah and COVID-deniers. But I'm going to suggest that all of us have inclinations that push us in those absurd directions. And that's what Jesus is calling out here. It's absurd to care about the category a person falls into when that person is saving your life. And so it's equally absurd to for us to care about what kind of person we should help and what kind of person we shouldn't. The person we should help is the person who needs our help.

Jesus doesn't come out and say that directly because he's not just interested in our behavior, in what we do, in how we act in a certain situation, or how we don't act. Jesus is interested in changing our hearts and our minds, so that God's way becomes our way, so that we want what God wants and love who God loves, and not the other way around. Because when by the grace of God that happens, when our hearts and minds are captured by the love of God in Jesus Christ, who, as Paul writes in Romans, died for *us* when *we* were still God's *enemies*, then we don't find ourselves asking, "whom do I *have* to love?" We find ourselves asking, instead, "who needs my help? Who needs my care, my attention, my concern? Who needs the good news of God's love in both word and deed, and how can I be a part of God's loving mission to a hurting world and a sign of God's coming kingdom?" The eternal life that the lawyer was so keen to inherit is ours, a gift of God for Jesus' sake in Holy Baptism. May we trust that promise so that we find ourselves asking those more helpful questions, and so that the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.