

Today's sermon title MAY be the most unusual one you have ever heard... at least from me. And I have had some PRETTY unique ones! It came to me as I considered today's Gospel passage: a very familiar story of three different men all walking into the same situation in a desert setting. And for some strange reason, I thought about that popular genre of jokes involving 3 men walking into a drinking establishment. If you happen to not be familiar with this particular line of 'jocularity,' here are a few examples:

Three men were walking into a bar, and the first man said, "My wife was reading A Tale of Two Cities and she gave birth to twins." "That's funny," the second man remarked, "My wife was reading The Three Musketeers and she gave birth to triplets." The third man shouted, "Oh my, I have to get home quick!" When asked what the problem was, he exclaimed, "When I left the house, my wife was reading Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves!"

Then there's 'quick hitters' like this one: Three men walk into a bar. You'd think ONE Of them would have ducked...

And finally... you know, in good '3-point sermon' fashion... **An architect, a lawyer, and a hunter walk into a bar**, having a debate about whose job was the oldest. "Obviously it's my job," bragged the **hunter**. "Cavemen got their food by hunting, which makes my job older than civilization." "Yes," the **architect** replied, "but if you read the Bible, it says God created the universe out of **darkness** and **chaos**. This technically makes God the architect of the universe." The **lawyer** simply smirked. "True, but who do you think invented darkness and chaos?"

Now, what do these jokes have to do with today's message? Absolutely NOTHING! Well, a lawyer does play a prominent role in the Gospel reading. And that the story IS about 'three men who walk through a 'bar'... well, maybe a 'SAND bar'... Those men are, respectively, a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan. Two church leaders and a foreigner. Who are traveling along a hot, sandy road between Jerusalem and Jericho. And so, to make this story perhaps just a little more relevant, I chose three more modern, but similar, subjects: a **minister**, an **elder**, and an **immigrant**. But regardless of the time period, this parable of Jesus is a timeless answer to the question of that 1st Century legal expert: *"Who is my 'neighbor?'"*

The story begins with that bright young barrister asking Jesus what most of mankind has pondered since time began: ***“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”*** (Luke 10:25) And, in His usual good Socratic method, Jesus answers a question with a question: ***“What is written in the Law?”*** (v. 26) ‘What does God’s Word say?’ To which the lawyer responds, ***“Love the Lord your God with all your... heart, soul, mind, and strength. ...And love your neighbor as yourself.”*** Jesus answers, ***“You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”***

This is an exchange WE would do well to remember. For anyone who wishes to ‘inherit eternal life,’ where do they find out the answer? God’s Word. The “Law.” The ‘B-I-B-L-E.’ The Law and the Prophets, which Jesus Himself told us is summed up in two simple statements: LOVE GOD. LOVE ONE ANOTHER. **Love...** vertically, and horizontally. ***“Do this and you will live.”***

Now, judging from the lawyer’s answer, apparently he was ‘down’ with that whole ‘loving God’ thing... but this ‘neighbor?’ ‘Jesus, I’m going to need some clarification here. Just WHO is my neighbor?’ It actually says that he asked this ***“wanting to justify himself.”*** (Don’t we ALL!) He wanted to narrow it down to see just what ‘neighbors’ he could find a ‘loophole’ NOT to love. ‘Jesus, I want to be a believer enough to get me to heaven, but I don’t really want to have to CHANGE what I do...’

Now you may think that sounds pretty hypocritical. Well, let’s consider that priest and Levite. Or, to make it more ‘relevant,’ that ‘minister’ and ‘elder.’ Who happened to be walking down the same road as a ***“man (who) was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho.”*** This is actually an important detail to the story. Coming from Jerusalem this man was most assuredly a JEW. Of the same lineage as those religious leaders. And yet, even though they were countrymen, neither of these fine, upstanding ‘pillars of the church’ would even stop to check on this beaten and bruised man. They actually avoided him as much as they possibly could... each one ***“passed by on the other side.”*** Pretty condemning of ‘religious’ types, wouldn’t you say? Goes along with a saying from our more modern era: ***“the most damaging witness to the Christian faith can be Christians.”***

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this story about showing compassion... or lack of it... is what comes next. ***“...a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.”*** (Lk 10:33) While his very own Jewish brethren turned their backs on

this beaten man, this 'Samaritan' just had to lay eyes on him and was 'moved with pity'... with compassion, with sympathy. A SAMARITAN! Many of you know that there was NO love lost between the Jews and those who were from Samaria. They were seen by the Israelites as lesser, inferior, not worthy of association with. 'They weren't FROM here.' Much in the way that 'immigrants' to our own 'United' States can be treated. From nationality to political party, our attitude in this country toward those who are 'different than us' can sometimes painfully fulfill that derogatory label of 'Ugly Americans.'

And how did that citizen of Samaria react? It said that when he saw him, when he simply caught a glance of the wounded Jewish traveler... knowing full well where he was from... **"he was moved with compassion."** He went right up to him, poured expensive resources of oil and wine to cleanse his wounds, bandaging them, and took him to a nearby 'Comfort Inn' where, after spending the night (and early morning?) caring for this perfect stranger, paid the innkeeper to make sure the man would continue to be properly cared for.

One of the images that I came across to depict this story showed the Samaritan as a very dark-complected man, while the one he cared for was very fair-skinned. Obviously two men from completely different ethnic backgrounds. BUT THAT DIDN'T MATTER. He didn't see color or nationality. But rather, HUMANITY. As one commentary put it, this story reflected different perspectives on this wounded man. The law expert considered him a *subject to discuss*; the robbers, a *victim to exploit*; the religious men a *problem to be avoided*; the Samaritan, **a human being to LOVE**. On that lonely road with no one to witness it but God, the love of God was embodied not by ones who merely *professed* to be believers, but by one who actually LIVED it.

Paul's letter to the Colossians was written to **"saints and faithful sisters and brothers in Christ"** who also LIVED what they BELIEVED. He wrote that **"we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for ALL the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven."** (Col. 1:4-5) 'Faith.' 'Hope.' 'Love.' Sound familiar? Remember that famous line from 1 Corinthians 13? **"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."** (v. 13, NIV) Or as one translation says, these three **"will last forever."**

As we try to live lives that will honor God... that 'will last forever' ... to 'inherit eternal life' ... those three elements are of vital importance. **Faith. Hope. Love.** We must remember, though,

that 'faith' is 'unseen'; 'hope' we hold onto for the 'future'; 'LOVE,' however, is what we demonstrate in the here-and-NOW. The unconditional love of Jesus that we can sometimes see better in someone much different than we are than ones who are more 'like us'...

As many of you know, Barrie and I live in an apartment not far from here/the LC church. There I have had the pleasure of meeting one of our neighbors named "Ed." Ed serves full-time in the Army Reserve (which was pretty obvious from the camo fatigues I often see him in). He is originally from Peru, by way of 'New Joisy,' and is an avid runner and biker (non-motorized variety)... which is what got us really 'connected' in the first place. We regularly talk about the latest bike or running excursion. I have really enjoyed getting to know Ed, as well as his wife Rossi, who is from Central America.

One day we were talking about what brought him from 'south Jersey' to 'south LA,' and how that transition had gone. He said that in general it had gone very well, but that there was one experience that really had troubled him. In meeting someone for the first time, after exchange of first names, the person looked him in the face and asked, "What are you?" Not, 'Where are you from?', but 'WHAT ARE YOU?' Recognizing that this person was more interested in Ed's immigrant status rather than his personal story, my young friend calmly replied, "A human being."

I can still remember how both **appalled** and **embarrassed** I was. Angry that this fine young man who serves to ensure our freedom and 'domestic tranquility' would be 'objectified' in such a discriminatory manner, and distressed that it was done by one of my fellow citizens of SWLA. Perhaps even a fellow CHRISTIAN...

And so, my fellow faithful brothers and sisters in Christ, let us be ever mindful of how we treat our fellow 'human beings.' That no matter what differences we may have between one another, first and foremost we are to be members of the Kingdom of God. The fellowship of ALL the saints. That as we seek to be a people of **faith** and **hope**, the words of an older praise hymn are SO true: *"And they'll know we are Christians by our LOVE."* Love that is to be shown wherever we are, to whomever we meet... be it on a roadside or a sidewalk; be it at work, or at home, or anywhere in between. As we seek to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, may

we know that we cannot completely do so *without* loving our neighbor. Unconditionally. Everywhere. Even, perhaps, when a minister, an elder, and an immigrant walk into a bar...

CHARGE: I shared with you earlier the image that showed the Samaritan, who was clearly 'not like' the wounded Jew he was ministering to... showing unconditional love completely unaffected by differences in race, ethnicity, religious background, or anything else. As I look at the one he was caring for, I thought about how his appearance was similar to what Jesus has been depicted as looking like. Even though we know that Jesus was NOT a fair-skinned, blue-eyes, blond-haired European that some have pictured him. Regardless of Christ's physical attributes, what this picture reminds me is that when we minister to others... especially those different than us... we are, in effect, ministering to JESUS. When we look into the eyes of someone who is hurting, we are looking into the eyes of Jesus. So, as we go out from this place to show the love of Christ TO His people, may we know that we do NOT go alone. For the Spirit of the living God is... And all of God's 'good Samaritans' said, "AMEN!"