Parables of Jesus

The Good Samaritan – Rev Brian Burger

**Luke 10 : 25 – 37**

25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

26 “What is written in the Law?” Jesus replied. “How do you read it?”

27 He answered: “ ‘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 ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ”

28 “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?”

30 In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. 32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

36 Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

37 The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

At some stage in life we all possess a guiding theme or question that determines our direction in life. It shapes the overall narrative of our life and informs the decisions we make and actions we take. It is a question or theme that we think will provide us with a meaningful life, a worthwhile life.

It happened for me in response to a question posed by my pastor, Rev. Trevor Hudson, before he took 14 of us teenagers on an annual Pilgrimage of Pain and Hope during the mid-1980s. The Pilgrimage took us to places in our broken nation where people, in various ways, experienced the brunt of immense injustice or heartache. The question simply asked each of us why we wanted to go on this Pilgrimage. My answer would forever shape the direction of my life thereafter. It came from the 1984 song by Foreigner, “I want to know what love is!” As it turns out, that phrase crystalized my life purpose ever since.

My question to you today is: What phrase or question or theme determines your life? Have you thought about it? It might be about making as much money as possible. It can be about the quality of your work. Or it may be about building strong relationships with family or friends, or both. Perhaps it revolves around demonstrating sacrificial care towards a particular group of people such as the sick or elderly or ostracised. What is it that gives you fulfilment in life?

As we turn to our Biblical text for today, I want to suggest that this was at the heart of this lawyer’s question to Jesus. He asks about what will ensure eternal life for him. Remember that eternal life is not only about life after death, but also refers to a meaningful existence here on earth.

In response, Jesus tells this story. He first paints the picture of a crime scene. It’s a picture that a lawyer will be all too familiar with. It’s also a picture we are familiar with. It’s the tragic picture we see every day.

The picture contains the criminal. We see the hijacker, the corrupt official or politician, the extortionist, the burglar, the bully at school or work or the taxi, the rapist, the one blocking the pathway into medical facilities and the scenes of domestic violence. Take your pick of the endless list!

Then there’s the victim who suffers at their hands and left broken and marginalised… often forgotten by next week’s news. Some victims asked for trouble by travelling alone on the dangerous Jerusalem-Jericho road; others completely innocent like the baby shot dead by cowardly gangsters; or those forced into undesirable situations beyond their control.

We have those passing by on the other side. They are the frightened or apathetic passers-by who ignore the situation, sweep it under the rug or just record it on their cell-phones for Tik-tok “likes.”

Fortunately, there are also the caring ones who, like this Samaritan stop and help. They are the first-responders, the medics, the honest law-enforcers and voluntary citizens, the ones who are prepared to get their hands dirty and offer genuine assistance. Alongside that are the follow-up staff, the inn-keepers, who help the person put their life back together again… the hospital staff, counsellors and supportive friends and family.

We are familiar with this scenario too, aren’t we? They occur in our communities, our government, our churches, our workplaces and our homes. This parable is not far from home.

Having presented this picture to the lawyer, Jesus pushes the legal expert into admitting that the despised Samaritan acted in a neighbourly way. Remember, it comes from the original question about ensuring eternal or a fulfilled, meaningful life. Thus, the Samaritan is assured of that kind of life.

Jesus turns the secondary question “Who is my neighbour?” into “Who acted like a neighbour?” When we ask the question about behaving like a neighbour, then the question of who my neighbour is becomes irrelevant. We act like a good neighbour irrespective of who the recipient is. Thus, loving God and acting as a neighbour are key to ensuring a meaningful life.

The question before us today, then, is around being a good neighbour. Because that is part of how we will experience eternal life, a life of ultimate fulfilment. Well, in response to that, let me just point out a few things for us to consider.

1. One is that our compassion needs to be rooted in God’s compassion for us.

We love because the Lord loves the world. It does not exclude anyone. God’s love goes beyond our boundaries of nationality, citizenship, class, social status. The intolerance, jealousy and aggression we see in our world today is a denial of God’s dream.

Do you know your place, your status in God’s presence – forgiven, healed (or at least on the pathway towards healing), worthwhile, blessed, embraced with an infinite kind of love, and filled with untapped potential for growth? When you’ve tasted at God’s dream for you, it will seep out into benefiting others too.

1. Secondly, our neighbourliness takes the step of specific commitment.

In the passage, we see the Priest and Levite passing by on the other side of the road. But I want you to notice the preceding words that they both “saw the man” and then walked on by. It is important to have our eyes opened to the needs around us, but it must be followed up by constructive action. That requires commitment. It takes courage. It requires focussed attention. The Priest and Levite probably had other important matters to attend to, or become “unclean” (unable to do their jobs for a prolonged period of time) or would have their own lives put in jeopardy, or thought they couldn’t contribute anything worthwhile to a dying or dead man.

We fear commitment – prolonged involvement, financial cost, putting up with our inefficient legal system, not having the required expertise or knowledge… all sorts of excuses.

Not only that, we may have this sense of being overwhelmed by the many needs we see around us. Hence, my third point to consider is:

1. The Lord gives us the necessary wisdom and strength to face our commitments.

Yes, we cannot tackle all the needs in society. We need wisdom from above as to the arena He is calling us into. Which is the one (or maybe two) areas that break your heart the most? I think God’s calling is wrapped up in that. It may an issue at home or with a family member, a close friend in need. It could be something at work or in your neighbourhood.

Then, once identified (and it may be something temporary), use the gifts you have and invest them into addressing those concerns. It can be any number of things:

* A listening ear that will allow the person to tell their story in their own words without interruption or criticism.
* Some financial assistance to get someone back on their feet, be it individually or through an organisation.
* A lift to the hospital or to the shopping centre or to visit their child or parent.
* Companionship at a court appearance or medical visit.
* Providing a level-head in an emotionally charged situation.
* Researching or getting specialised help and support groups.
* Regular blood donations that can save numerous lives.

These are just some things off the top of my head where we could be a neighbour to someone in need.

In closing, all I am saying is that, in response to our fundamental question of what will give us eternal life, a meaningful and purposeful existence, we turn to this parable Jesus told a lawyer seeking answers. Love God and be a loving neighbour.

The phrase that shaped my life “I want to know what love is” led me into the pastoral ministry in the church. Through it I have had the privilege of entering the sacred places of people’s lives.

It has taken me into their grief and loss through divorce and death;

It has taken me into their family problems of bringing up children and dealing with elderly parents;

It has given me access into schools, police stations and prisons where I could share the gospel message in words and presence;

It has taken me into hospital passages of the mentally disabled, of sickness and childbirth;

And the additional moments of birthday celebrations, weddings and anniversaries.

There is so much that I look at with a rewarding sense of gratitude as I have wrestled in different contexts with the meaning of love. Without a doubt, I can say that those things have given me a life purpose beyond my wildest dreams. And I encourage you to find that unique neighbourliness that will give you your eternal and fully meaningful life too.

Amen.