

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²⁷And [the lawyer] answered, “You shall *love*...” “You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.” ²⁸And [Jesus] said to him, “You have answered right; do this, and you will live.”

From time to time, my wife, Carol, asks me what I am going to be preaching about, and I always give the same answer: LOVE. And she always replies, “That’s good.” And so it is: Even if it is midweek and I have not yet decided on my particular Sunday theme, or if I have decided but forgotten, I still answer that I mean to preach about love. Whatever the Biblical story, in the Old Testament or the New, whatever the Biblical character or parable, my theme, Lord willing, will always be love, sweet love. Love is the Church’s song:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son...”(John 3:16)

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.(Romans 5:8)

So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.(1 Cor. 13:13)

And so, if Carol had asked me earlier this week what I intended to preach about this morning, I would have answer, LOVE, only this time my answer would have been right not just in general, but also in particular. The beautiful parable of the Good Samaritan is a parable about

love, and the drama of the parable is that it beckons you and me to such a manner of life. Today, Jesus bids you and me to be people of love. And if we already are such people, then our Lord bids us to renew and seek to strengthen our lives of love.

In the tradition of Christian virtue, that excellence of character called “love” is not an emotion, but rather a set of the soul toward the neighbor. Because it is not an emotion, but a stance toward others, it is steady and reliable. Love counts the neighbor precious. Love considers it good that the neighbor exists. Love would not be without the neighbor, not wanting that loneliness.

Love bursts forth into good deeds and prayer, doing what it can to protect the neighbor and to help the neighbor to flourish.

Nor does the virtue of love depend on whether the neighbor is lovable. Rather, love forges ahead and smiles upon the neighbor, not so much because of who the neighbor is, but because of who *we* are. And so, love spends itself even on forlorn causes, for it was not so much seeking a reward as bestowing a blessing in the life of others.

And love is local. That is, love does not overlook the poor man lying at our feet, or the family entrusted to us, in favor of grand generalities or far-off causes.

I think we will see some of these themes in this morning’s parable of the Good Samaritan. But before turning to the parable itself, let us linger some with the conversation between Jesus and the lawyer — the conversation that prompted this moving story of the Good Samaritan.

The man asks Jesus a substantial question. It is a question concerning life, and it is phrased with utmost earnestness in that it speaks of “eternal life”:

“Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”(Luke 10:25)

The years slip by. When you are young, you think you have an endless supply of years, but the truth is, our life span in this fallen world is limited. Three-score and ten years? By God’s grace, maybe that, maybe even more. But however many years are granted to us, they slip on by, and we are confronted with the question, “Have I lived my years well, or ill? This time entrusted to me — have I lived a good life, or have I squandered my years? Will I have lived in vain? Will my life bear the lens of examination? Will my years bear the marks of eternity?” This lawyer, I say, is not a frivolous man. He asks an earnest question about the years entrusted to him. He asks about a worthy manner of life. He asks about how he might live and walk that he might live a life pleasing to his Maker. He is not asking about success in business or success in finances, but about success in life as Jesus teaches the meaning of life.

So, the man asks an earnest question, and our Lord gives an earnest answer. Please observe that Jesus does not dismiss the question, nor subordinate it to some other matter. Jesus does not say, “Oh, do not worry about *your* manner of life. Instead see what *I* am about to do for you.”

Now, Jesus is indeed about to do something wonderful and extraordinary for the world: Indeed, Jesus is about to suffer death on the cross that our world might have some hope. And nothing we can do will ever match that, nor be so wonderful. And yet, the lawyer’s question is not about what Jesus is to do, but rather, What would Jesus have *him* do with the years granted him? And Jesus answers this earnest question by speaking of love: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind, strength and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself.

That is, Jesus invites the man to join the divine way of life. We sang of that way of life just a little while ago in this morning’s Psalm — Psalm 25:

⁵Remember, O Lord, your compassion and love,*

for they are from | everlasting.
⁶Remember not the sins of my youth
and | my transgressions;*
remember me according to your
love
and for the sake of your good- |
ness, O Lord.

This is what our Maker believes in. These are the principles according to which he himself lives: He believes in the truth, he is compassionate and loving, willing to forgive and full of goodness.

Jesus, then, asks the man, and asks you and me too, to live like God — that high, that majestic a life! He asks us to become people of love, like the Good Samaritan and like Jesus himself.

It so happens that the lawyer asks a very fine question about the life of love: “And who is my neighbor?”(Luke 10:29) In our modern world, so beset by terrorism, we have learned that we human beings are capable of extraordinary deeds of love and self-sacrifice. We are even capable of losing our lives trying to make things better for “our people.” The question, then, is not simply, “Shall I love?” but also, “Whom shall I love?” If I must love my neighbor as I love myself, then, Who is my neighbor?

This is the question addressed by the parable of the Good Samaritan. And all the traits of Christian love I earlier noted are on display in this parable:

First, love is not so much an emotion, but a set of the soul toward others. We know little of what the Good Samaritan thought or felt. We do not know whether he was glad to help the man, or whether, instead, helping the man constituted suffering for him, perhaps because it interfered with other good work he had meant to do. We do not know the emotions of his heart, but simply the character of his conduct toward the poor, beaten man: he had compassion. This is a bottom line thing — a matter of behavior. The priest and the Levite, whatever their emotions about the case, did not have compassion on the poor man, but the Samaritan did.

Second, the Samaritan showed love toward the poor man, not because the man was lovable, but rather because it was the character of the Samaritan to practice compassion. He leapt ahead and loved the man — a man who according to the religious sensibilities of the day, was an unlovely man, for the beaten man was a Jew, while he who helped him was a Samaritan. The Good Samaritan's love, then, was color-blind and race-blind and so forth, perhaps because the Good Samaritan was not thinking so much about the man himself, but about God and the manner of life that is pleasing to our Maker and bears the marks of eternity.

And finally, the Samaritan's love was local. There was other good work for the man to do, other noble causes for him to pursue. But here lies the man, right in his path. The Good Samaritan seems to suppose that this man before him is not some random event in life, but more the work of God's providence. This one in his path, close to him, becomes an object of his compassion.

St. Paul teaches that love is a gift of the Spirit — indeed, it is the highest gift. This means that we are bidden by God to practice love. We ourselves — and not just Saint Francis or Mother Theresa — but we too are bidden to practice love and promised that we will not be lost thereby. We each have many responsibilities and opportunities in life, but the spiritual gift of love means that we will not err in including love for the neighbor in our day to day manner of life.

Notice that the lawyer had asked “Who is my neighbor?” but our Lord gently turns the question back toward the man by rephrasing the question a bit: After telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus asks the man:

Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?”(Luke 10:36)

And so, the question is not simply about our neighbor, but also about ourselves? Do we prove neighbor to others?

Now, in the Blessed Sacrament we come into the presence of the One who proves neighbor to you and me. For we were a fallen people, and some of us know only too well the multitude of ways in which we have fallen, by our own fault, or have been beaten down by others. But here comes Jesus, the true Good Samaritan, and he means to lift us up — lift us all the way to heaven — and not at the cost of coins given to an innkeeper, but at the cost of his own body and blood given for you.

As we come into his presence, let us permit his final words to the lawyer sing in our ears and haunt our heart: “Go, thou, and do likewise,” to the benefit of our neighbor and to the glory of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.