

Introduction.

Which do you think are the best known Bible passages? My list would include The Lord's Prayer, the 23rd Psalm, Jesus story of the Prodigal Son and today's passage, the Good Samaritan. These are probably some of the best loved portions of Scripture. **"Familiarity breeds contempt"** was a common saying when I was growing up. But if not contempt, familiarity certainly breeds a loss of impact. The Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, the Pharisee and the Publican all too commonly and easily become simple, moralistic stories which we moderns dam with faint praise saying-**'oh what a wonderful story'**, while secretly thinking, **'how unrealistic and impractical is what is being said'**. What these stories do **not** do for us is to cause us to think **WHAT!** To feel outrage that one of our religious leaders would **Dare** tell this story. We have tamed these stories that they no longer cause us anger and outrage when we hear them.

The Context.

The context of this story is very important to our being able to properly understand what Jesus was getting at and then interpret it accurately. Luke tells us that Jesus is asked a question. **"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"** Jesus answer is that eternal life is not ours because of an experience or event in our lives, not by a response to a singular situation that we might make. His answer in effect is **'if you want to have eternal life this is how you must live long term; these must be your values and be expressed through your conduct'**, Notice Jesus questioner is described as 'a lawyer'. All lawyers in Jesus time interpreted and ruled on how **the law, The Torah**- the five books of Moses are to be applied today. I suppose the nearest equivalent for us would be constitutional lawyers. What this man wanted was a very clear ruling from Jesus - **'this is what you must do'**. He wanted no ambiguity or grays, just black and white certainty and precision-**'you need to do this but it you do not need to do that'**.

But rather than giving the lawyer what he wanted Jesus responded with a question of his own. **"What does the law say on this matter"**, he asked? This was a Jewish law 101 question, the sort of thing that the dullest 10 year old in a bar mitzvah class could answer without any difficulty. The lawyer trots out the standard answer known as the Schema - he wore these words in a little leather box, called a phylactery on his wrist.. **"You shall love the lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."** I'm sure this lawyer felt offended- he wanted a deep, rigorous discussion and instead got a grade three answer. So he follows this up with a more difficult question. **"But precisely who is my neighbor?"** Is it the person next door? Those who live on my street; those who are members of my Synagogue; my extended family? What this man is really

asking is – I want to know who is in and who is out? What precisely are the boundaries?

A man who had recently begun worshipping with us, in a previous church in which I served, made an appointment to see me. After the usual pleasantries had been exchanged he said to me **“I want to know how much I should give to the support of this church”**. I began to talk about the teaching of Scripture and the teaching of the Episcopal Church, that all members give 10% of their income, as well as their time and gifts to the support of God’s work through their church. Eventually he held up his hand to stop me, then said **“but what I want to know is how much do people here actually give-what is the average?”** He was asking **‘what do I need to do and what do I not need to do?’** I call this the paying taxes approach.

We often behave like this, thinking we want to protect ourselves we want to do what we have to but no more

The Story

Jesus answers the lawyers follow-up question by telling a story-familiar to us as the Good Samaritan. But as I have already suggested this story has little of the impact for us today as it would have had when Jesus first told it, so.... In order for us to be shocked and challenged today, as was the anonymous lawyer in Jesus day let’s put this story in modern dress.

Imagine that you are hiking along part of the Superior Hiking Trail, north of Duluth. You go off the path a couple of hundred yards to take a dip in an adjacent pool. After your swim, getting out you slip and badly sprain your ankle. There is no way that you can walk back to the main path, your ankle has swollen so much that you can’t get your boot on. Dusk begins to fall. You hear someone walking on the main trail and yell for help; you hear the person stop for a moment but then they hurry on. You feel so depressed and fearful. Again you hear people on the trail and yell for help; a young couple eventually appear. They are sympathetic to your plight, but very concerned to make it back to the young woman’s parents house before curfew-they are already late. He says apologetically, **“I have no service on my cell phone up here so I cannot call for you, but as soon as we get back we will phone the authorities-I’m sure they will get to you in a few hours”**. They glide away, oblivious to all except themselves.

Just as it is going dark you hear a noisy group on the trail, they are singing songs but you realize these lyrics could not be sung on TV! Several of the voices sound ‘well oiled’ with beer and as they draw closer you smell the distinctive odor of pot. By now you are so cold and in so much pain that you throw caution to the winds and yell out for help. When these people finally appear all your fears are confirmed. This is a group of Hells Angels! A couple of them are carrying 24 packs, you suspect that they had considerably more at the start of their walk.

Many of them sport extensive tattoos, some have multiple body piercings, for you it is a nightmare group. But when they see you situation they dump their packs of beer and two of the largest guys pick you up and begin to carry you. They take you to where their bikes are parked, load you onto the back of one of them and take you to the nearest Emergency Room.

Depending on your particular fears and prejudices we could replace the motorcycle gang with:

-A bunch of people of different race to you, speaking a foreign language.

-A group of gay men or women..

-An group of Muslim men, complete with copies of the Koran and prayer mats.

Jesus question to the lawyer was, ***“Who acted as a neighbor in my story”?*** The answer was the most unlikely person possible for the lawyer to imagine- a Samaritan. But notice the twist on the story that Jesus gives it. He has been asked who do I need to be neighbor to? His story is about who will act as neighbor to me? The most unlikely person acts as neighbor to "One of us". Jesus says to us today ***“Who is God asking you to be a neighbor to today?”*** But also ***“who will you allow to be neighbor to you?”*** Everyone and anyone, including the most unlikely person.