

Reading through Luke's Gospel is like stepping into a flowing stream; the water has been moving along long before you've arrived, and it comes from a source sight unseen. The stories in Luke function as stepping stones, guides for us to know where we're going and to help us cross safely and securely. There is a deeper rhyme and reason to the way the stories are organized and told in Luke's gospel than we are generally aware.

The first stepping stone of our story today immediately precedes our reading and sets the tone for everything to follow. A lawyer has stood up to address and test Jesus, and asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (It's a question we may all have in the back of our minds every Sunday we come here.) After Jesus asks him what there is in the Law about this, he gives an answer that Jesus is actually very pleased with: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your strength and all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus tells him, do this- and you will live....

Now, not satisfied with Jesus' concise and direct answer, this lawyer wants specifics- who is my neighbor? And that's when Jesus begins to spin his yarn, as they say... and he answers with more than just a story. Luke organizes the next two passages back to back to teach a larger lesson. We will read the Good Samaritan story and then visit with Mary & Martha, two sides of the same coin in Jesus' answer to 'what must I do receive eternal life?'

*... a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

*He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?"*

*He answered, "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."*

*And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."*

*But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*

*Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.*

*But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"*

*He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."*

*Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.*

*But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."*

*But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."*

Both of these stories are about living faithfully. Luke uses the vivid stories of Jesus to bring home the theme that we should love God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves.

The story of the Good Samaritan shows love of neighbor--that's what the Samaritan did for the man beaten by the robbers--and the story of Mary and Martha illustrates love of God--that's what Mary is doing sitting at Jesus' feet.

Good Samaritan--love of neighbor. Mary and Martha--love of God. In a Christian life, they're intertwined, mixed together; you can hardly tell where one ends and the other begins. They're two sides of the same coin.

The lawyer can recite the commandment to love, but he doesn't seem to know how to put it into action. Jesus deflects his combative attitude with a story, opening up the inconceivable notion that someone outside the community of God's promised people can both know and share God's love.

Martha can be offended at Jesus' generous spirit, that he favors her sister's behavior more than hers. That Jesus accepts Mary sitting at his feet, pretty much unheard of in that time and culture- is something she is missing out on.

Both these stories upset the applecart of conventional understanding, which is just what Jesus had in mind when he said what he did in parable and teaching.

It sort of reminds me of a poem- one of the poet Mary Oliver's shortest and best.

Pay attention!  
Be astonished!  
Tell about it!

God is on the loose in our world... even in us! Even the daily routines of our lives are filled with the potential of meeting God in others. Even in the Cliff Bars or the dollar bill you share with those standing on the strategically busy street corners of Baltimore, as you look them in the eye and let them know you are praying for them... Or even as you now have extra time freed up, now that the Olympics are over, to read through the Gospel of Luke instead of trying to find something else to binge watch. God is on the loose in our world... even in us!

Which reminds me of the best words we will share, a little later in our service today as part of the ordination and installation of officers. Widely recognized as the best of the vows you will be asked to affirm – it goes like this: Will you seek to serve the people with Energy, Intelligence, Imagination and Love?

That's a question we should include in our services every week- for all of us!

The dual charge to love God fully and your neighbor as yourself is a big one- and we like to break it up into smaller, discreet, achievable tasks. Which is fine, except when the big picture overwhelms your field of vision and you lose the trees for the forest. It's like the quote from the Peanuts cartoon strip from some years back, when Linus van Pelt says, "I love humanity, it's people I can't stand."

Well, Charles Schultz would need to rectify that sentiment with some wise words from Charlie Brown himself; maybe like "But Linus, you know, you are a person too."

What finally might be missing for us, when we can't quite make the connection between our hearts (what we believe we should do)- and our feet (what we actually end up doing) might be illustrated in a final story I'd like to share.

It comes from a dear friend of mine, one of my preaching buddies, Virginia Miner, who some years ago served as part of an advisory group to the chaplains at the University of Scranton. The job of the group was to meet, to listen to reports from the chaplains about their work, and to offer support and counsel. One year, as reports were being shared in a question-answer format, an older member of the council asked the chaplains, "What are the university students like morally these days?" The chaplains looked at each other, wondering how to answer that question.

Finally one of them took a stab at it. "Well," she said, "I think you'd be pretty pleased. The students are very ambitious in terms of their careers, but that's not all. A lot of them tutor kids

after school. Some work in a night shelter and in a soup kitchen for the homeless. Last week a group of students protested apartheid in South Africa..."

As she talked, the Jewish chaplain who was listening to her began to grin. The more she talked, the bigger he grinned, until finally it became distracting.

"Am I saying something funny?" she said to the Jewish chaplain. "No, no, I'm sorry," he replied. "I was just sitting here thinking. You are saying that the university students are good people, and you're right.

And you're saying that they are involved in good social causes, and they are. But what I was thinking is that the one thing they lack is a vision of salvation."

They all looked at the Jewish university chaplain. "No, it's true," he said. "If you don't have some vision of what God is doing to repair the whole of creation, you can't get up every day and work in a soup kitchen. It finally beats you down."

If you don't have some vision of what God is asking you to do, in the ways you can help to repair the world, it finally beats you down.

Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens to his Word, hears that vision and is nourished, and without that Word, she runs dry.

The Samaritan, somehow, knows what the vision of God is in the world- and it's not about abandoning helpless people. It's not that he's better than the Priest or the Levite- it's just that- somehow- he has a vision beyond them and knows just what to do.

As we continue today to worship, as well as in our daily living throughout this week, may we keep our eyes on Jesus, not just in scripture, but in everyone we are called to serve, in Jesus' name. Amen.