

Good Morning! Thank you for welcoming me to Holy Trinity. And I also thank Father Ben for generously allowing me to be a part of this “Pulpit Swap” here and opening your pulpit and altar to me. I hope and pray he’s having an equally good time at Good Shepherd in Pitman.

As I was preparing for this weekend, I was thinking... How fortunate you are to be named “Holy Trinity.” Your name is a constant reminder of one of the greatest mysteries of the Church - the Trinity. It is good for us to be reminded that there are things we don’t understand and may never understand until that glorious day when we too, like the disciples, shall have our minds opened by the grace of God. Mysteries are a good thing.

I’m going to focus my homily today on our Gospel.

I’ve just gotta say it - Ohhhhhh, all you poor lawyers... It appears that even in Jesus’ day lawyer bashing was a common practice. Of course in the case of this particular lawyer, he asked for it. He asked Jesus a question that any good Jew knew the answer to and he knew it and he knew that Jesus knew it. He was just showing off. So Jesus proceeded to treat him like the “excellent, brilliant student” he apparently wanted to let everyone around him know that he was!

Jesus answered him by throwing his question back at him: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The young man gave the right answer... of course... it was expected... everyone knew he would. “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 Jesus responded - “Good answer!” (he got a gold star!) But then the parable goes on and *Jesus grabs the opportunity*. Our gospel says, “But wanting to justify himself, the lawyer asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Oh ho! There’s the question! There’s the question for the *ages!*

Now this lawyer may think he knows the answer to this question. He may think he’s just baiting Jesus and that’s as far as it’s going to go. Little did he know...

(Oh, this reminds me of my days in seminary. I was an older student and I would watch the clever intellectual traps that some of my younger fellow students would set for themselves. It could become very interesting. I soon figured out to just keep my mouth shut and pay attention. I learned more and I avoided embarrassing myself!)

But Jesus had plans for this fellow. Because he knew, just as I think we know, that implicit in the question “And who is my neighbor?” is the strong desire to be told how to limit the answer, to

limit and put boundaries on his responsibilities. He didn't want too many neighbors. And if we're honest, we want to put limitations on this "neighbor" thing too. Jesus taught this young man and us with a parable - an excellent way to teach a lesson that sticks. He told him the parable of the Good Samaritan.

First, I can assure you that the road from Jerusalem was pretty desolate. It still is. It would not be unusual for robbers to hide out along it. And then we find out that the victim in the parable was left beaten and half dead.

While he was in this state, a priest passed him by. So did a Levite, another devout person. Now this seems callous to us, but if these were devout men, they absolutely *could not* touch the beaten man. He was bleeding and beaten and therefore ritually unclean. Being unclean meant that they *shouldn't* touch him, they couldn't do anything for him.

The rules of their faith gave them an out. According to their faith they were completely justified in ignoring this man. He was a mess! He was *unclean*! The Levite and the priest could easily make excuses for their behavior. Essentially, they were willingly trapped by their rules.

Then along came the Samaritan. Uh, oh, that really muddled the waters! Samaritans were walking nests of uncleanness! They

were despised by the Jews. They were second class Jews. There are still Samaritans to this day, and they're still looked down on.

So "Who is my neighbor?"

The ones who passed the victim by — their faith was restrictive. It was about rules. It wasn't about God's love. It wasn't about loving their neighbor, which Jesus just taught was one of their most important rules. But their other rules, their cleanliness rules became excuses, easily fitting into their prejudices, something to hide behind.

And then along comes the Samaritan, the loathed Samaritan who helped the victim, dressing and bandaging his wounds, putting him on his own animal and bringing him to an inn where he paid two denarii out of his own money for the man's care and vowed to return to pay whatever more the man's care required. A denarius was worth about a day's wages in Jesus' day.

I can assure you that the introduction of the Samaritan into the story was absolutely shocking to Jesus' listeners. Anyone else! A Roman, an Egyptian, but a Samaritan? They're barely human!

And yet the question remained and still remains: who is my neighbor? Jesus says the neighbor is the one who shows mercy - period - end of sentence. And then Jesus instructed them all, "Go and do likewise."

Whoever is in need is our neighbor. Whoever needs our mercy. There's our guide. [There's our plumb line, the line we heard about in Amos that always falls straight and guides us to go straight.]

Who is our neighbor? That's the question God asks us and God expects an honest answer. Our neighbor might be a total stranger. Our neighbor might be unlikeable. But God sends us our neighbors. And God requires us to be neighbors to those who need us.

That poor lawyer got more than he bargained for, didn't he? He just thought he was going to engage in some intellectual banter with this Jesus character... But Jesus always pulls us up short. We may think we've got everything all figured out. But Jesus knows better.

(At this point in my sermon I told a story about a baby I was once asked to baptize. The baby's mother, a single parent, and her two prospective godparents came for a meeting with me. I was quite certain the prospective godfather was higher than a kite! What to do? I related that I thought it best to regard the baby as my neighbor and proceed along that line. So I baptized her. When the prospective godfather came for the baptism, he was not high, for which I was grateful. I think I actually made a little headway with the baby's grandparents and mom and I think I may see them again. The godparents? I'm not so sure. The mother was grateful, however.)

The simple question - the question God wants us all to ask and answer — “And who is my neighbor?” — was answered by the lawyer in our gospel. He finally answered with Jesus’ blessing, “The one who showed him mercy.” The one who showed him mercy. And finally Jesus ended the conversation and blessed him with, “Go and do likewise.” Simple and direct - “Go, and do likewise.”

Jesus’ instructions are pretty clear.