

## “Not Required”

Luke 10: 25-37

It wasn't exactly an interrogation. The questions were not so much an investigation into the facts as they were a test of his authority. Jesus ministry was growing, rapidly. He was moving from village to village, town to town, everywhere he went teaching and preaching and healing. Everywhere stopping to care for those weighed down by worries and sadness and sin and sickness and hopelessness. Word about him was spreading and now wherever he went, a crowd gathered. Recently he spoke in an open field beside the shore of the Sea of Galilee to a crowd of thousands. So he enlisted helpers, first twelve disciples, followers but also close friends. They would become supporters but also partners in ministry. But even those were not enough. So he appointed seventy others to go ahead of him, to visit the towns and villages in advance, to spread the message of his coming. But not everyone was excited by this swelling tide of hope. In fact, it made some people very nervous. To be fair, this wasn't the first circus that had come through town. They had experienced the snake oil salesmen and magicians and the psychics and the con artist and even self-proclaimed prophets before, each one of them with their own band of loyal followers and show promoters. They were familiar with those who would prey on the poor and the poor in spirit, making promises of grandiose schemes and false hope. So you might say that they were naturally suspicious and took steps to root out the frauds from among them. That is not to say that there weren't other motives at work. The Jewish leaders were self important. They liked to be seen parading around in the public square, while dutifully fulfilling all the requirements of the law. And they were self-protectionists, fending off any attempts to overthrow their power, prestige or authority. So when the hype about this Jesus begins to gather steam, the religious leaders begin to challenge his authority, hoping to put a damper on all the enthusiasm, to generate some bad press which would spread to the towns and villages down the road before his arrival, and to quash any uprisings before they got out of control. Over and over again they tried to discredit Jesus, to trip him up, to discount him as irrelevant, blasphemous even.

It should come as no surprise then, that on a day when a crowd had gathered around him to witness Jesus commissioning these 70 followers to their work in the towns and villages of the Galilee region, that there would someone from the religious establishment in the crowd, someone to keep tabs on what was being said, how the crowd was reacting, and to publicly challenge and if they were good enough, to humiliate the agitator and turn the crowd against him, running him out of town. Jesus had just finished sending out these 70 eager disciples when he spoke up from the crowd. “Teacher, what is it that I need to do to get eternal life?” At first glance, it sounds like an honest question, a question posed by one who is seeking. But Jesus immediately recognizes something about the

questioner: perhaps it was his long religious robes that gave it away. “Tell us, what does it say in God’s Law? How do you interpret it? He knew the law inside and out, knew all the nuances and the loopholes. He knew when to take the law at face value and when to manipulate the words to strain out a different interpretation. He knew how to use the law to his own advantage. And you can get away with that when you are talking to people who are incompetent, like me, people who are dazzled by the deft with which he can throw around clauses like section 7 subsection 23 article b. He had a way of intimidating those around him. And he tried hard to impress, to make himself look good; his therapist said that it would boost his self-esteem. But making yourself look good at the expense of others is never really good. You might have thought that one so highly skilled at using and interpreting words would be more careful about throwing them out - leaving his own life open to interpretation. And that’s where Jesus begins, inviting the legal expert, whose expertise was interpreting the laws of Moses, the Torah, by inviting him into a conversation, a conversation open to interpretation. The legalist gives the “right” answer – the way to eternal life is to love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.” That’s the legal requirement. But Jesus responds with a challenge of his own. “Do this and you will live.” Easy to say, not so easy to do. It’s one thing to be able to repeat the law; it is quite another to live it. And suddenly the lawyer is looking for a loophole, an asterisk that directs you to read the fine print. “Define neighbor,” he challenges Jesus. So Jesus responds with a story, not by defining the word “neighbor” but instead demonstrating a love that goes beyond simple definitions.

The story of the “Good Samaritan” has become a part of our cultural linguistic. Jesus told the story to this man, who was a part of the Jewish religious establishment, but also to the gathered crowd. The story has an element of predictability: everyone knew the road through Samaria was crawling with thieves. It was a precarious journey. So it comes as no surprise to the man or to the crowd that the Jewish traveler is attacked and left for dead. But what comes next is shocking. The first man who comes upon the scene is a neighbor, at least by the Jewish definition of the time, a fellow Jew, and there’s a sigh of relief among the crowd when they hear that he is a priest. But that holy man sees his neighbor and diverts his eyes and makes a be-line for the other side of the street. Jesus continues his story. All is not lost because coming up the sidewalk next is a Levite, one of the people who read the scriptures at church on Sunday. Scriptures like the reading from Deuteronomy 6 which the legalist quoted to Jesus at the beginning of their conversation, the reading on love. But the Levite is not thinking about the Scriptures, not thinking about love, he is just thinking about how to get out of here as fast as possible, thinking that this is not his problem, not his responsibility, thinking that someone else will come along to help him. Maybe he even promises to keep him in prayer. And then he takes a wide berth around the beaten body of his neighbor and continues on his way. And someone else does come along: a Samaritan man. You can insert whatever word you want in the place of the word

Samaritan. The person who is coming up the road is not your neighbor; or some might even say they “aren’t your kind.” Maybe they are from a different socio-economic background, maybe from a different class, maybe a different ethnicity, maybe they have a different religious background, maybe they don’t have the same social graces. Whoever they are, they are the ones that you don’t want to see coming: you are desperate and I don’t mean you’ve run out of gas kind of desperate. It is life and death, you need a kidney transplant or you aren’t going to make it, but please anyone but her. But when the Samaritan man see the man who has been beaten and is suffering, his heart is moved, and not only does he take him to a place of safety and pays for his convalescent care, but he actually cares for the man himself, cleaning his wounds and bandaging him up, going beyond expectations, beyond obligations, beyond what is required, to love at all costs. Though under the law he was not required, the Samaritan man responds without hesitation, without considering the options, without looking for a way out or making inquiries as to what the reasonable limits of his services must be. His heart is moved by love and in love he responds.

The legalist, on the other hand, can’t even bring himself to say the word. Jesus has come to the end of his story. But he turns again to the legalist and this time he asks the question: who do you think was the neighbor? Not who was the neighbor, as in, who was the one that fit the definition under the law, not who was obligated or required, but who actually acted as a neighbor. But the legalist just can’t bring himself to even say the word, Samaritan. So instead he answers that the neighbor was the one who was kind. And again Jesus responds with the challenge: go and do. It’s easy to say, harder to do.

How many of us find ourselves caught in the position of the legalist: before we sign on to anything we want to get it in writing; just exactly what will be expected of us, what will the requirements be? The legalist was trying to whittle it down to the bare bones – what do I have to do here? What is my obligation? In other words, what is the minimum amount that I have to do but still get all the benefits? We want to know because like the legalist, we don’t really want to have to go beyond expectations. When will it be enough? Enough. You never really hear that word in a motivational speech to elite athletes. You never hear the coach or even the players say, don’t worry about tonight. Don’t work too hard. Don’t over extend yourself. You’ve already done enough. Instead what you hear is “If you want to win the prize, give it everything you’ve got. It will take all of you.” Sadly, I think that same attitude can carry over into the church, where we just want to know what our commitment is going to cost us. What will I have to give up? You mean I have to go to church on Sundays? You want me to quit swearing a blue streak? You expect me to give money? You expect me to stop gossiping? You want me to love who? But Jesus blows the doors wide open – moving beyond the realm of the mere requirements and obligations of the law, moving beyond the limitations of the law– far beyond what was even imaginable, addressing not what is required but what are the limitless possibilities when we

operate not under law but under love. Just a few chapters earlier in Luke 6 Jesus imagines this same kind of unlimited response to God's love when he said "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you. If someone asks you for your coat, give them your shirt as well. If someone slaps you on one cheek, offer the other cheek to them." Jesus challenges us to walk an extra mile, to forgive not 7 times but 70 times 7. The story Jesus told of the Good Samaritan grows right out of that sermon: this is what it might look like if you put his words into practice. The story grows out of Jesus own life: He did not merely hang on a cross and suffer for a few hours and then call on the legions of angels to get him down because he had done enough, he had given enough. He gave it all – freely and generously – because of love.

You might not have noticed but this whole story, the whole scripture lesson hinges on love. Eternal life hinges on love. The response of the good Samaritan hinges on love. Sadly, the legalist is speaking another language. He's talking about love. He knows the word "love" only as a noun. But twice Jesus encourages him to try using "love" as a verb. Eugene Peterson writes, "Love" as a noun is a vast and complex subject. Philosophers and theologians write thousands upon thousands of pages exploring cultural expressions, its emotional intricacies, its psychological nuances. But there is surprisingly little of that sort of thing in our Scriptures. Love is not a subject to be discussed by our prophets and priests, our apostles and pastors, our praying-poets and our wise sages. The word is used as a noun often enough, but most significantly in our Scriptures it is as a verb that it springs to life. Not "god is love" but "God so loved the world..." The moment the noun "love" becomes a verb it ceases to be a subject to be discussed or understood or explored. It enters our lives."<sup>i</sup> That's the difference between the legalist and the Samaritan: one is talking about love, the other is living it.

Yesterday four women came to offer gifts of love not out of obligation but out of response to God's great love for them. You could see it on their faces. On what would be the nicest Saturday in 10 months, these women gave up their Saturday mornings. There was not one complaint that instead of spending the Saturday morning sleeping in or with their family they had to be at the church to get a meal ready for 110 guests—instead there was laughter and joy. Their kids came and my kid came and even the kids helped to serve. And you know what happened, instead of the usual whining, "can we go home, when can we go home, I want to leave," Lauren asked her mom "can we stay?" When I got home, I sent off a quick thank you email and all four women responded with the same sentiment, summed up in this one response: "It is such a pleasure to serve Jesus in this way. It is so much fun!" That's what happens when we serve God in generous love – that serving turns to joy.

God enters our lives in love. God gives himself to us in love. And we are invited to share in that love and to respond to God in love: not getting away with serving as little as possible but having a heart that loves to serve. And serves to love. Not giving as little as required but in God's grace being

freed to give generously, and cheerfully, as much as we can. To know the love of God and to go and do.

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<sup>i</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Tell It Slant*