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Pentecost 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Samaritan We Need and Have”
Text: Luke 10:25-37; Psalm 136:1

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The man was a lawyer. An expert in the law. Lawyers are trained in details and specifics. Everything defined, everything precise. Dot all your i's and cross all your t's. Nothing left uncertain, nothing left to interpretation. That is the goal, at least. This is what it says, this is what you do.

So it is natural and quite in keeping with how this man was trained for him to ask for more definition, more precision. If there is a contract between God and man for salvation, for eternal life, then he needs to know: *How is it fulfilled? What shall I do? Who is my neighbor?*

But Luke adds an extra little detail . . . this wasn't an entirely innocent or impartial question this lawyer was asking. He thought he already knew the answer. He asked, Luke tells us, to test Jesus and to justify himself and his understanding of the law. And at first, it goes well. He and Jesus are on the same page. Love God, love your neighbor. But then the lawyer springs his trap! Ah, yes, but . . . *who is my neighbor?* That would make a big difference, wouldn't it? If who qualified as my neighbor was a group this big [**arms out wide**], or a group this big [**hands in narrow**]! So what say you, Jesus? The lawyer turns Jesus' question back around to Jesus. Jesus had asked him; now he asks Jesus. *What is written in the Law* about that? *How do you read it?*

The lawyer thought he was putting Jesus on the stand, in the dock. But in the end, it's the lawyer who gets schooled. But maybe not in the way you think . . .

Because, usually, when we hear this parable of Jesus, the Good Samaritan, we think Jesus is just answering the lawyer's question and teaching him the meaning of the word *neighbor*. And He is. He is. That's certainly a part of it. But there's another part, another word the lawyer really needs a better definition for - though he doesn't realize it - even more than the word neighbor. Did you catch it? Did you hear it? What he really needs to learn is about the word **love**. If you are to *love your neighbor as yourself*, you not only need to know who your neighbor is, you also need to know what it means to **love**.

Now you've heard this parable before. So you know the priest and the levite did not treat this man as their neighbor. Maybe they didn't think he was - their definition of neighbor was this kind of group [**hands in narrow**]. And perhaps they were on their way to serve their neighbors who were in this [**hands in narrow**] group. To fulfill their vocations as priest and levite. To do what they were supposed to do. But, of course, one of the things Jesus is teaching here is that our group of neighbors is not this [**hands in narrow**], but this [**arms out wide**].

So a Samaritan stops to help, treats this man as a neighbor. But not because he knew he should or must to keep the law, that this was expected of him, to gain salvation or eternal life, but because *when he saw him, he had compassion*. Which means his gut wrenched. He couldn't not stop and help. He wasn't thinking about what he should or shouldn't do - he just did it. Here was someone who needed his help, so he helped.

But actually that's not quite right, because he didn't just help. He went above and beyond help. Help was *binding up his wounds and pouring on oil and wine*. Help is maybe also *putting him on your own animal to take him someplace safe to rest and heal*. But this Samaritan goes above and beyond that - he pays for his care, with the promise of paying *even more* if need be. Whatever it takes. Two days, five days, ten days. *I will repay you when I come back*. That's not just help - *that's love*. Then add to the fact that this was a Samaritan doing this for a man who was probably Jewish - since this story took place between Jerusalem and Jericho, in Judea - that this Samaritan was doing this for a man who didn't just not like him, but thought of him like a dog, as someone less than human . . . **love takes on a whole new meaning here**. This kind of love transcends culture, language, race, or what I shall or must do. It simply gives. Because it cannot do otherwise.

So it turns out that not only is the definition of the word **neighbor** really big [**arms out wide**], so is Jesus' definition of the word **love**! And now hear what Jesus said to this lawyer again, with *those* definitions in mind: *do this* - this kind of love [**arms out wide**], to all these neighbors [**arms out wide**] - *and you will live*. You will fulfill the contact and have eternal life.

That's like telling a man in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, thousands of miles from any land whatsoever, with no boat, no life jacket, no food, water, or anything else to help him survive . . . just swim until you reach land and save yourself and live. Which, *while technically correct*, is not very likely.

So what the lawyer needed to realize is that the answer to his question, *What shall I do to inherit eternal life?* was really this: **You need a Samaritan**. A Samaritan to stop and help you. A Samaritan to love you. A Samaritan to save you. Which is an answer extremely offensive to a Jewish lawyer! But that's okay. It's true nonetheless.

So isn't it interesting that a couple of weeks ago, we heard - right here in church - the Jews say this to Jesus: *Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?* And Jesus' answer began this way: *I do not have a demon* (John 8:48-49) . . . but He doesn't refute the Samaritan claim! Now, of course, technically, Jesus was not a Samaritan. He is a Jewish man, from a Jewish family, raised in Galilee. But He *is this* Samaritan. The Samaritan we need to come and help us. The Samaritan we need to love us. The Samaritan we need to save us.

And one of the clues to that understanding is that word *compassion*. That's a Jesus word. That's how Jesus looks at us. We who have been beat up and beaten down by the world. We who have been robbed and stripped by satan, who robbed us of life and stripped us of our innocence. And he doesn't care for us. He leaves us for dead. But not Jesus. He saw our state and His gut wrenched. *He had compassion*. So He came down from heaven and did far more than simply be a neighbor - **He loved us**. Which is also what we hear of Jesus: *having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end* (John 13:1). He loved us to the very end of His strength, to the very end of His life, giving everything He had for us, withholding nothing. That we have life now and life eternal.

And He still is. The Samaritan we need is the Samaritan we have. For still Jesus is coming and washing us from our wounds and sin in the water of baptism. Still Jesus is binding up our wounds by pouring on the oil of His absolution. Still Jesus is feeding us and strengthening us here, in His Church, bread and wine, Body and Blood, food for body and soul. And He paid for our care with what is worth far more than anything in this world - with His blood - so that we have all that we need. An endless supply. This is His love for us.

So, *What shall I do to inherit eternal life?* Well, Mr. Lawyer, here's the answer: **just lie there**. And let your Samaritan do the rest. Let your Samaritan love you and care for you and save you. Which is the very thing He came to do.

Now, in our day and age, that's just as offensive an answer to many as it was to that lawyer. There must be *something* I have to do! Swim part way to shore, cry out for help, reach out my hand, allow the Samaritan to help me and not push him away . . . But the truth is, *you can't*. Because satan didn't just leave you half dead, as this man in the parable, you are *all the way* dead! *Dead in your trespasses and sins* (Ephesians 2:1; Colossians 2:13). Until your Samaritan comes and gives you life from the dead. Raising you up to live again.

So to do that, Jesus came and became the man in the ditch. He took the blows and punches of the world. He was rejected and slain on the cross. He was dead and buried in the tomb, with no one to help Him or save Him. He came to do that for you, so that doing what you could never do, rising from the dead, He become the source of your life. He be your Samaritan. The one who knows what it's like to be in the ditch of death, and knows

what it takes to pull you out and give you life.

And now, He says, you go and do likewise. Not because you have to be saved or have life - but because *now you can*. Because the life you need is the life you've been given. The love you need is the love you've been given. The compassion and mercy you need is the compassion and mercy you've been given. You have a Samaritan, a very good one, and now you get to be one, too. To your neighbors [**arms out wide**], with compassion and love [**arms out wide**]. Because of your Samaritan, *whose love*, as we sang over and over in the Introit, *endures forever*.

And do this, too: think of all the people who have been your Samaritans over the years, who have shown the compassion and love of Christ to you. And again, as we sang in the Introit: *give thanks to the Lord*. For them.

So this lawyer got quite the education that day. Not in the Law, as he expected, but in the Gospel. That when it came to him and his salvation, it was Jesus dotted all the i's and crossed all the t's. it was Jesus who left nothing uncertain, nothing undone. So when someone today asks, *What shall I do to inherit eternal life?* here's the answer, spoken by Jesus a little bit later. Spoken by Jesus when He was the man in the ditch with us, when He was on the cross. ΤΕΤΕΛΕΣΤΑΙ. *It is finished* (John 19:30). What must you do? Jesus in His compassion and love has already done, finished, it all.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.