

Hands on Faith

Luke 10: 25 - 37
John Bell/Iona Community

Reverend Heather Miner
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Our scripture begins with a question. A lawyer asks Jesus, to test Jesus' character-- to test his power-- what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Even in how the question is framed you sense that this story from Luke will require one to do more than just believe. The lawyer asks, what must I do? In the same chapter, before the question and the parable, Jesus sends out 70 disciples to heal the sick and proclaim the Kingdom of God is near. They are sent out two by two into the nearby towns. When they return they are greatly excited about their success. They exclaim, "even the demons submit to us." While they are amazed about what they can do in this life, the lawyer chooses to ask about the next.

What must I do to inherit eternal life?

Inherit is a choice word as well...for it suggests a will which gives goods to the family of one who is no longer on this earth. The question can be reframed-- what must I do to be part of the family who gets the inheritance of eternal life?

Jesus permits the lawyer to answer his own question.

Jesus: Mr. Lawyer, what is written in the law?

Lawyer: 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."

Of course the lawyer knows the right answer. He has known it since he was a child. The law has not changed nor does it require a lawyer to work out the details.

Jesus says, yes, that's right, that's the contract. Then he looks at the lawyer and says, "do this, and you will live."

Martin Luther informs this reading. He is uncompromising in his critique of the lawyer. Luther writes in his commentary that..."He was so pious and learned that of course he was worthy to talk to the Lord.... Christ reveals that when he allowed himself to think he had done everything, he has, as yet, done nothing."

Even before the parable, the point is made that to know and say the words, to simply believe, is not

enough. Do this, Jesus says. And, so it makes sense to stop and consider what it is we are to do. The first is to love God with all of our heart, soul, strength, and mind. I think such devotion is harder--requires more from us-- than we admit.

With a small group of women I've studied Islam these past couple of weeks. Islam, of course literally means 'surrender'. They who pray 5 times a day cannot make it through a day without contemplating God. Muslims understand that their lives are a gift from God; many give up things we hold important in the West in order to live according to God's law. Meanwhile we complain about what God hasn't done for us, and often find very little time for devotion during our days. On occasion, even we religious folk might take God for granted.

Now, contrary to Islam, Christianity is open to different ways of being with God. It is not necessary for us to pray 5 times a day prayers that have been spoken since the days of the Prophet. But it is necessary that we find a way to be with God throughout the day.

Sitting here today are artists and runners and parents and businessmen and authors and doctors and lawyers and volunteers and so many others. Consider this: you have been called into a vocation, into a place of work, a place of living, that you might heal the sick and say the kingdom of God is near. Like the seventy, you have been sent out.

Long ago, I took my first class in CPR and First Aid as a young woman to prepare to work with children at a summer camp. After the 16 hours of training, I felt ready to serve. Bring on that roast chicken; let someone start choking, I was ready! I'd be the first to jump up because I knew how to save a life.

I know, you've been trained in your vocation, you have trained to run, you have been painting since you were a child. Today scripture reminds me to remind you that as an act of devotion to the one who gave you these gifts, it is better to do these things with God.

When I start thinking about seeking to enter into the presence of God in daily life, I think of a man named

Brother Lawrence. Richard Foster, the founder of the Renovare program which invites Christians into the disciplines of our faith, writes of Brother Lawrence: "No task was too trivial for Brother Lawrence, for he was able to transform the mundane chores of the kitchen (he worked in the kitchen of a the Discalced Carmelite order in Paris) into glorious experiences of heaven." Brother Lawrence (who lived in the early 1600s) expresses beautifully the joy of living in the presence of God. He writes, "I have given up all forms of devotions and set prayers.... I make it my business only to persevere in God's holy presence wherein I keep myself by a simple attention and a general fond regard to God. Or, to put it another way, an habitual, silent, and secret conversation of the soul with God."

The great thing is you don't need to have someone choke in order to act. You can bring God more fully into your life. But it does require your constant attention.

Lawrence continues "I was seeking to become wholly God's. I resolved to give my all for God's all. I began to live as if there was none but God and I in the world. I continued it even in the midst of all the difficulties that occurred. At all times, every hour, every minute, even at my busiest times, I drove away from my mind everything that was capable of interrupting my thought of God."

That's one way to go about it.

John Bell taught us yesterday about Celtic Spirituality. One of the characteristics was a constant attention to God in everyday life. Unlike Brother Lawrence who pictures a "king, full of mercy and goodness who embraces me with love, invites me to feast at his table, serves me with his own hands, and gives me the key to his treasures," they might see Jesus at their own table enjoying their hospitality. They could connect to a God unafraid to get involved in the human realm—a God that could help to close the mouth of the gossip.

Whether you imagine the one who invites you into heaven or to the one who is glad to enter into your day....5 times a day it may prove a help to us to use our heart, mind, soul, and strength, wherever we are, to turn our attention to God, to imagine however we are able, that we are in the presence of the one who delights in being near us.

The second part of the great commandment, love your neighbor as yourself, is a lesson often taught

to preschoolers, so simple and so necessary to getting along in this world. It is so basic that I think we often try to do it without love of God. And that makes it harder. I think the love of God is like the 16 hours of training I received for CPR or the 10,000 hours it takes to become good at something...it is what enables us to walk with Jesus, to act like Jesus.. because when you turn your attention often to God, it is easier to see others through God's eyes.

Love of God allows you, when someone decides to take up running with you as their coach, to help train not only their body, but their spirit. Love of God allows you, when someone comes to your office with a struggle, to listen as Jesus would. Love of and devotion to God prepares you to jump up and be the first to touch the one who has fallen on the road.

The irony of the Good Samaritan parable is that those whose profession was to be with God were not able to act when a man, on their path, was dying. The priest, the Levite, they see—but they are unmoved. They pass by.

One can do all the priestly things and not love God enough to be moved when one of God's sons is bleeding on the road. Broken, barely alive, he won't be showing up at the temple that night. It is the Samaritan, the one unconcerned with the temple, who is moved by compassion to act.

Before I move beyond what you can only see as Luke's critique of organized religion of the day (some things never change), I want to say that I love church. I sat with a member this week who told me how she came to church because she knew it was the right thing to do. She went on to say..."But I didn't expect that I would get closer to God.." And, in writing a friend, I realized that church has always been the place where I've found my way back into God's love because of people of faith. From the woman in Las Vegas who met me my first Sunday saying "Hi I'm Pat, and we need to start an Aids ministry" to the man who came off the street and into the possibility of sobriety in Rhode Island because he saw an angel in the light of the church window, to Hector in Moreno Valley who sang love songs in Spanish and you knew that he was singing out his love of God, to Marilyn an older woman who went to all the classes the church offered and found her way through the lost love of her life with the help of God, to Daniel Okabe of Uganda who says I do it all for God and you believe it. And I look out on your faces; I look at

each one of you, and I think of how many times, in how many ways, each of you have helped me to find my way back into God's love.

I've told this story before, too bad, I'm telling it again. A small group of rag tag church people decided to go on a moderate hike in the desert up a hill to overlook rocks that have been tossed by the earthquakes of our land. With me was Tedd and Sheri who some of you know...Tedd had been recently diagnosed with MS. There was Jessica, a young woman struggling with her weight and boys, who spent nights in the bar. There was Richard, a gay pentecostal man. And then, Andy, who was a boy in Germany in World War II, who escaped the Third Reich. Like the Samaritan, each one stood outside of the 'mainstream' of our culture. And each one made time for one another. It took us half a day to get to the top of the mountain. Once there, we walked out on the outcrop that put us right over the cliff. There...Andy, the 70 year old man who would declare himself an atheist...he would say it was the choir that kept him in the church...took out his harmonica and played "How Great thou Art."

Church does have a role to play, especially if we embrace our own Samaritan character. We do not need to try to be part of the crowd, we just need to learn to stop when God brings someone into our view.

It is remarkable how much time the Samaritan takes to care for this man. He bandages him, he takes him to the inn, and he stays the night with him. In the morning he asks the innkeeper to keep watch saying he will come back and repay whatever else is owed.

I am sure the Samaritan had places to go, things to do. Yet he was moved...he allowed God to move him with compassion, he allowed God to move him to the side of the road. And, all the "to dos" of the day slipped away as he, like Jesus, healed a man.

After today, I will no longer be your minister. But your opportunities to minister are abundant. There are many, who are not here today, who need your word, your love, your touch. Let God move you with compassion, the God who you love, who you seek out day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment. Jesus will lead the way.

Having told his story he asks the learned lawyer which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?

The answer is obvious...the third one...the Samari-

tan...but the lawyer describes him as..."the one who showed him mercy."

Well then, Jesus looks him up and down, "Go and do likewise."