Text: Luke 10:25-37

**Introduction**

There is this sub-genre of stories that are like the song The Devil Went Down to Georgia. At the higher end you have Faust or The Tempest. At the popular end you have A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, the Devil and Daniel Webster or the Jack tales like Jack and the beanstalk If not having the Devil himself, Br’er Rabit is always talking his way out of trouble. If you’ve ever read some African stories, Anansi does the same.

Heroes come with a variety of key traits. Different cultures might favor some over others, but they all tend to have examples. There are probably as many as there are virtues. Some are courage – say Harry Potter. Some are strength – Hercules. Some are Wisdom – Father Brown’s mysteries. Some are even purity of heart – Sir Galahad. And some are not wisdom exactly, but smarts of various kinds, usually with silver tongue. Now each one of those traits tends to have its temptation, a way that the virtue becomes corrupted. But it’s that that last one that tends toward easy self-corruption. We’ve all known that person who was too smart for their own good. We’ve all laughed at the movie scene when the smooth talker gets punched in the mouth. Everyone’s got a plan, until they get punched in the mouth.

**Text**

Our text follows the return of the 72 from their mission and their rejoicing at their strength against the demonic. And after Jesus redirects them about what to be thankful for, Jesus adds this odd little prayer. “In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. (Lk. 10:21 ESV).” And as if conjuring exactly the example of what he speaks, “behold, a lawyer stood up to put Jesus to the test. Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

The problem is not the question. It’s a good question. I wish more people were concerned about that question earlier. There is a lot of wisdom in realizing that one is mortal. There is a valid quest in seeking an answer as to what if anything is next. And what does one have to do. Do you have to have courage? A Pure Heart? Do you have to be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect?

The problem with the lawyer is that he thinks he can talk his way in. And this is a problem a lot of us have. We want to be able to talk our way in. We know what the law says. And this lawyer answers perfectly. “Love the LORD you God…and your name as yourself.” So much so that Jesus tells him “you answered correctly, do this, and you will live.” And if he had done that, just like if any of us go and try and do that, honestly try, we pretty quickly realize we can’t. I’ve always loved Peter’s lament at the Council of Jerusalem, “why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? (Acts 15:10 ESV)” That is personal knowledge and historical knowledge. “Do this and you will live” isn’t exactly a lie, it’s a yoke we can’t bear.

“But the lawyer desired to justify himself.” If we can find the right string of words, the right magical incantation, surely we can talk our way in. We can justify ourselves. It isn’t my fault I can’t pull that yoke, it’s any number of other targets, often including God himself. After all, you are the one who made me this way. But long before we get to that last verbal joust – blaming God himself – we first try and limit the scope of the law. This lawyer tried to limit who was in the circle of love. “Who is my neighbor?”

**Moral**

Now this question has actually been in the general culture recently. Our Vice President invoked something called the order of love. And like all things in our culture, his invocation of it became a game of political gotcha. Because all sides were “attempting to justify themselves.” We all seem to want to be the smartest person in the room. And immediately people were quoting our parable at the Vice President. Even though he himself was just quoting Thomas Aquinas and St. Paul, “But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1 Tim 5:8).”

The problem is one of the heart. Why is one attempting to put an order on love? The valid reason is that we are limited creatures. Even states and budgets as rich as the United States have limits. And if as too often happens, we are caring about the abstract far away cause, while our own kids starve and go around smelly, as Paul says “we have denied the faith.” Does the heart admit the universal call, but has just met its practical limit. Or is the heart attempting to justify itself? We don’t really feel like those people are our neighbors. We’ve decided in advance that we aren’t doing anything. And we just don’t want to hear it.

Now in our cultural discourse we compound the problem by ascribing to the political other the absolute worst construction. We can’t seem to stop moralizing prudential judgements.

But our text today is directed at the heart that thinks there are parts of humanity that are beneath care. Jesus tells the story of the beaten stranger. And the Priest and the Levite both think they have perfectly good religious reasons to walk on by. Whether it is the uncleanness of a dead body or a number of other potential problems. They decide they have no obligation. That the man is not their neighbor. He is someone else’s problem. But the Samaritan, the most hated group of people to his listeners, the Samaritan stops and completely cares for the beaten man until the end. “Which of the three was a neighbor?” And even the lawyer has to admit that his words have failed. “The one who showed mercy.”

And Jesus said to **him**, “**You** go and do likewise.”

**Christology**

We may want to talk our way in. We may want to place ourselves in the place of the three others. We may even hope that we would be the Samaritan. But the fact is that what Jesus asks the lawyer is “who was a neighbor to the man who fell among robbers?” It’s a question that places the lawyer – that places us – in the roll of the beaten half dead man.

Because that is truly where we are found. Sin, death and Satan himself have robbed us of everything. We are all but dead. And if there is anyone who could ask the question, “who is my neighbor” it would surely be Christ. There is more distance between God and us than between any member of humanity. If anyone was justified in treating someone outside the circle of love, it would be God and sinful humanity. But God crosses that distance, becomes incarnate, and gives himself for us.

Christ has bound our wounds and paid for our care. He has had mercy on us.

And who is our neighbor? “The one who showed him mercy.”

Christ has embraced all of humanity in his mercy. That cross has given us exactly what we need.

We may want to justify ourselves with our words, what we need is mercy.

You can’t always get what you want, but sometimes you get what you need.

**Eschatological**

There is one last note. The Samaritan – the Christ figure – pays for the care to the innkeeper and says he’ll settle anything else when he comes back.

I hate assigning specific parts to story elements. But I’ve never been able to escape thinking in this way. Christ has given the deposit – the Holy Spirit – to the Church – the innkeep. Take care of the beaten men that Christ has claimed. Do what you have to. Preach to those who can hear. Extend the order of love a little further. Testify to the Good Samaritan – the man who is the neighbor of all. Encourage toward full health – sanctification. Christ leaves all of us sinners with the church, with each other as innkeeper.

And that charge will probably cost more than the downpayment. Live in faith. The one who showed us mercy is coming back. And whatever we spend in the meantime on care, he will repay it.

We’ve all been recipients of his bountiful mercy. What he asks is that we believe him. He will come and repay anything done for him. That when the opportunity is in the very path we walk, that we show mercy, regardless the cost. Because that is what Christ our neighbor did.