

“What to Do?”?
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 3, 2016
Gordon Wiersma

Text: Luke 10:25-37

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson – Luke 10:25-37

A few things to note about the Gospel reading:

- last Sunday Pastor Jill read a conversation between Jesus and his disciples about their ministry, and that conversation continues in Luke 10 including the lectionary reading for this Sunday. I'm actually reading the lesson for next Sunday (since our guest preacher is not using the lectionary) which brings us to a conversation between Jesus and a lawyer and to the well-known story of the Good Samaritan.

- this is a conversation between a lawyer and Jesus – the lawyer calls Jesus ‘teacher’ – ‘rabbi’ - and that’s reflected in the style of a Rabbi with lots of questions back and forth and the tradition of storytelling.

- and in the story keep in mind that for the Jews to whom Jesus was speaking, Samaritans were religious, ethnic, political outcasts and enemies

- and also keep in mind that the much maligned priest and Levite in this story were actually following the religious rules of that day

‘This is a test. This is a test of the emergency broadcast system – this is only a test...’ Do they still do those? – I always remember those as a kid on TV and radio - it doesn’t seem as often now, but I still think it happens. So in that spirit: ‘this is a test: a test of the emergency reformed theological orthodoxy system. This is only a test. In the event of an actual theological emergency, the ushers would distribute copies of the Heidelberg Catechism for immediate consultation and instruction. But at this point, this is only a test – we can decide a little later if it is an actual emergency.’ The test has to do with the gospel lesson from Luke – and the test is whether or not your reformed theological orthodoxy emergency warning alarms were set off by what happened there -which, I suppose, assumes that you have such a warning system at all – and even more, assumes that you care to have one. But I do have some sort of a reformed theological orthodoxy system in me – or at least I think I do! - which as a Reformed Church minister seems appropriate.

So, with my system in place – I read the lesson from Luke. A lawyer has a test for Jesus – “Teacher – what must I DO to inherit eternal life?” Ah-hah – my Reformed antennae picks up a signal – did that lawyer just ask ‘what must I DO to get eternal life?’? What must I DO? DANGER! Good thing he asks Jesus, because Jesus can set him straight. Jesus answers with a question – ‘well, what does the law say you should DO?’; the lawyer says ‘what you should DO is love God completely and your neighbor as yourself’; Jesus says ‘good answer, DO that and you will live.’ The lawyer says ‘well, but, who should I DO this to?’ - so Jesus tells a story of what a man DOES to help someone - and Jesus tells the lawyer to go and DO likewise and he will have life.

At this point my Reformed emergency alarms are going off full force. This is not the way it is supposed to go at all. We need to back up for a moment – back to the question from the lawyer - and think of what Jesus should have said – a good, Reformed Jesus: “Teacher, what must I DO to inherit eternal life?” – I picture Jesus saying ‘Ah, my friend, there is nothing you can DO to gain eternal life – nothing you can DO to earn it - it is a gift from God, a grace to be received.’ Then the lawyer would say ‘Ah, now I see Jesus, it is by grace that I am saved through faith, not by my good works!’ ‘That’s it’ says Jesus – and maybe instead of that Samaritan story, Jesus could tell about some person who helped free his neighbors from the burden of the law with the gift of

faith. And everyone around would nod contentedly: ‘it’s not about what I DO, it’s God’s grace’. Now THAT would be a good story from Luke – THAT would be a good Reformed Jesus.

Because you see, in the Reformed tradition, we know it’s not about what we DO – it’s about God’s grace. And if we don’t watch out, Jesus here could make things a lot more difficult for that view. Because there’s a lot of Reformed folks around here that for all of the talk about grace, are really quite convinced that it’s not about grace at all – it’s about points – how many points you earn by what you DO – that’s what gets you in good with God. I know there are people like that around here because I’m one of them – I can talk a good line about grace, but that points system is always lurking – and this story could push you towards points. Which is why you have to have an emergency warning system in place for Reformed theology– which is why it would have been better if Jesus had given a more Reformed answer to the lawyer; but Jesus didn’t – this is the story we are stuck with. And since another part of the Reformed theology system is that scripture is important - we need to deal with this story as its given to us.

The lawyer and Jesus – the story of the traveler and thieves, the Priest and Levite and Samaritan. I have heard this story many, many times – and the story itself has become an iconic cultural idea: the Good Samaritan. But I realize that for me in hearing this story so many times, I have learned to now almost automatically hear it a certain way – I have learned to hear this as a story about me, with the issue being: who will I be like? – the priest or the Levite or the Samaritan (the correct answer is c. - the Samaritan). But there could be other ways to listen – Jesus’ stories are never just about one thing - so I’d like us to try listening to this story differently this time – try listening to it as a story about God - what if we wonder where God might be in this story...?

I wonder about God as a priest or a Levite – it’s a realistic image one could have for God – God as one concerned with religion and rules – concerned with doing things the right way. God as a religious institution promoting religious requirements – God there for the people to come to, but insulated from the ugliness of the world. This is a God that would require much of people to do – and I think that people of such a God would ‘go and do likewise’ by creating a life of religion and rules – and keeping track of points. That could work pretty well – a clear system to enforce.

But I also wonder about God as a Samaritan – I wonder about God being so completely different than what I might expect – God so different than who I or you or others might make God to be: a God not concerned with religion and rules, dos and don'ts – but a God concerned with what is hurt, broken, in need. A God not fitting any of the expectations or requirements of religion, but simply a God who shows mercy – a God of compassion to the broken.

Now when I listen to the story in that way, seeing an image of God in the Samaritan, what is interesting is that it invites me to find myself in a new place in the story too – I start to see myself in the traveler. I start to see myself as one who has been shown mercy in my brokenness - one who has received compassion, healing; I find the story sounds like receiving a gift – it sounds like life as a picture of grace. It sounds like each day of life could be described as mercy, mercy, mercy, from a God present in the brokenness of life – my story, my reality is God's mercy.

So if from this story we hold that image of God and of self, of Samaritan and traveler, what does that say to my emergency reformed orthodoxy system? – because for all my exaggeration that you may have perceived in my initial protests about the threat this story poses to Reformed theology with its call to “DO” – my genuine concern is what sort of impact this story would have on those who hear it. Because the real ending of this story is to be found in the lawyer, right? – the lawyer who in the end Jesus told to ‘go and do likewise’ – what matters is how this story from Jesus actually played out in his life. And if this is just a story about a good example, would that move the lawyer to ‘go and do likewise’? – even a story about a very unlikely good example – the shock of a good Samaritan – will that do the trick, and have this lawyer DO the same? I'm not so sure – you don't think the lawyer had good examples before in his life? – I'm sure there were some kind priests and Levites around - maybe not so radical or dramatic as this story Jesus tells, but it seems like there's always plenty of good examples around – then, now, anytime. But good examples – good friends – good Samaritans – good enemies – is that what the lawyer needs to go and do likewise in his life? I'm not so sure.

Which is why finding an image of God in this story makes a difference – not just a good example, but the very heart of God revealed as a God of mercy. Because when life is received each day as a gift of God's mercy – when I hold onto that, am held by that – when I think, I feel, I

believe, that mercy creates and shapes my life - THEN I will, then I can, go and DO likewise, BE likewise. And such a God offers more than just a good example also because it may be then that we find God not only in the Samaritan, but also, even, in the broken traveler too – that Jesus Christ is God’s mercy made flesh, receiving the violence and brokenness of life – embracing it. If I saw my life connected to such a God – a God of mercy present in brokenness - then I can go and DO, BE likewise. When God’s mercy is our reality, our story – then mercy becomes our call as God’s grace creates a heart of mercy in us. That is how this story from Jesus seeks an ending, or a continuing, in those who hear it – ‘go and do likewise’ – it will be a life centered not in fulfilling religious obligation but a life sustained by God’s mercy; that is how Jesus is calling this lawyer, and us, to see God and self and others.

In a very little corner of God’s kingdom, in the church called the Reformed Church in America, there is actually something of a Reformed emergency going on these days – debates in our denomination that seem to get at what our identity is as a Reformed Church. And it seems important both to remember what a small little debate this is in God’s big world – so many things happening in the real lives and events of a world and people dealing with so many real issues - and yet also to realize there is something at stake in this debate in our little corner of God’s kingdom. Some things at stake like this: will we say that being Reformed is setting rules about who belongs or not, and making ever more intricate systems of points to see who qualifies? – will we say that this reflects the God we serve in Jesus Christ? Or will we say that being Reformed means this: mercy, mercy, mercy; grace, grace, grace? – say that Reformed means we have been found by a God of mercy who does not leave us alone in our brokenness but reaches out with healing; and that a God of such mercy calls us to the same – to be a people of mercy and grace, of healing in this broken world God loves so much. This is a moment as a Reformed Church to decide what our story is – and that will determine who we are and what we do.

Which is why this is a test - a test of the emergency reformed theological orthodoxy system. But the test is not for Jesus – Jesus is not concerned at all whether or not I think he is a good reformed theologian. The test is for followers of Jesus Christ, Reformed or otherwise to recognize God in our lives by recognizing our lives as a story of mercy. Jesus’ story tells us what

to DO: DO receive God's mercy – mercy, mercy, mercy from God as the story of your life – love this God the Samaritan, God the broken, with your whole being – let the love of this God of mercy live and grow in you each day – and the ending, that is, the continuing of the story will be this: go and DO likewise, live in gratitude as witnesses to God's mercy and grace (which is actually very Reformed!).

Thanks be to God. AMEN.