

We just saw Jesus under attack. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus is in a pretty pointed discussion with a lawyer. And this lawyer is trying to trap Jesus.

The lawyer asks "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The Greek words that Luke chooses indicate that this is not an innocent question. This is a hostile attack. The lawyer is trying to get Jesus to give a bad answer so that it can be held against him later.

But Jesus is sharp. He sidesteps the attack. He basically says, 'You're the lawyer, what does the law say?'

The lawyer replies with what we call the Summary of the Law: "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."

Jesus replies, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." In other words, 'You've just answered your own question. You know what to do. So why don't you go do it?'

Jesus neatly sidesteps the trap, simply by asking the lawyer to state what he already knew. Then he lobs it right back to the lawyer. You know what God wants in theory, and yet you're not willing to do it in practice. Instead of trying to entrap me, go out and love God and love your neighbor. Game. Set. Match. Jesus wins.

But that's not good enough for the lawyer. The lawyer wants to justify himself. He wants to save face.

Love God, and love your neighbor? OK. But the lawyer wants a definition. "Who exactly is my neighbor?" This is a rather legalistic question. Who do I have to love as myself? What's the minimum number of people I have to treat decently?

Because as soon as Jesus gives an answer, any answer, that will mean that some people will be in and some people will be out. Jesus might say, 'All the people of your family are your neighbors. Love them. Then you don't have to love everyone you're not related to.'

Or Jesus might say, 'Everyone that lives within 5 miles of you is your neighbor. Then everyone outside that circle is not your neighbor, and you don't have to love them.'

The lawyer is expecting to hear, "Love these people only, and then you don't have to worry about the rest."

But Jesus doesn't fall for this either. Instead, he tells the familiar parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus begins "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers." I've seen the old road from Jerusalem to Jericho. It winds through desert mountains, and drops 3,300' in 17 miles. There are lots of bends in the road. There are lots of caves and places to hide. It was a popular place for bandits to operate. That made it a very dangerous road to travel on alone.

So Jesus says "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers."

I'm sure everyone's reaction was, 'Well duh.' Everyone knows that the road to Jericho is dangerous. It's like saying, 'A man in New York was jogging through Central Park late at night, and he was mugged.'

You do something like that, and there's a good chance you'll be robbed. The man should have known better. It's partially his fault that he got mugged. He put himself in a dangerous situation.

Then Jesus continues. By chance a priest comes down the road. He sees the man. We're thinking, 'Yea! A priest. The man is safe. Help is here.' But the priest passes by on the other side. A Levite also comes by. Levites were those who assisted the priests by taking care of the physical needs of the Temple. He also sees the man. But he also passes by on the other side.

Now, we often try to make excuses for these guys. We often try to justify their behavior.

Many times I've read something along the lines of, 'They had good reason to pass by. The road was dangerous, and stopping to help the man who was mugged might have meant that they would also be mugged. It could have even been a trap. Robbers could have been using the man as a decoy, as bait. And on top of that, if the man was dead and they touched him, according to Jewish law, then they couldn't serve in the Temple until they had purified themselves.' Now these are all true and they are all real reasons for caution.

But at heart, they are still excuses. It boils down to this. Helping the man is risky. They might risk their safety, or their health, or their livelihood. But that doesn't get them off the hook. Jewish teaching says they should have stopped and rendered aid. Even if the man were dead, they should have stopped to bury him. The Jewish Mishna, which is a supplement to the Old Testament Law, is very clear. Even a priest is required to bury a corpse if there's no one else to do it, regardless of the consequences to his ritual purity. The good religious people, the Priest and the Levite, strike out. They don't do what's required. They see a man in great need. And they pass by.

But, a Samaritan stops. Now, that's a surprise. Jews hated Samaritans. Samaritans were not only heretics in the eyes of the Jews, but they were also racially impure. Jews despised Samaritans ethnically and religiously. It was a double whammy. Yet it is a Samaritan who stops. And he stops to help a Jew.

And remember. The Samaritan is putting himself at risk. He has a donkey. He's got money with him. Yet, he stops to help. The Samaritan binds up the man's wounds, after disinfecting them with wine. He takes him to an inn and gives the innkeeper 2 denarii, about \$100. And he promises to pay any additional bills later.

And after saying this, Jesus asks the lawyer, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" Like before, Jesus answers a question with a question.

Once again, the lawyer already knows the answer. He says, "The one who showed him mercy."

But then the kicker comes. Jesus says to him, "Go and do likewise." You know the law, now do it. You know who your neighbor is. It's anyone you encounter who needs your help. Show mercy. Go and do likewise.

It's so easy to pass by. About 25 years ago, Renee and I were visiting some friends in San Diego. We were driving down the freeway with three of our friends when we saw a car that had just crashed into a tree in the median. We stopped and got out. One man we were able to help. The other man was already dead. But what surprised me that day is no one else stopped to help. Cars went whizzing by. Yes, one guy did slow down and call 911 on his cell phone, which was something of a novelty in those days. But no one stopped to help. Even the news media which got there before the ambulance. They were more interested in getting footage than giving aid.

I'm sure those people thought they had good reasons not to help. Yes, it was dangerous to park on the shoulder and cross the busy freeway to the median. Yes, I'm sure they all had very important appointments that they had to get to. But those are still excuses. And they don't excuse passing by someone in need.

But it is so easy to rationalize. It's so easy for us to come up with excuses. In fact, I'll have to admit, that if circumstances were different in San Diego that morning, we might not have stopped. Renee and I were with our friends who were living there. But what if we had been by ourselves, driving in a strange city with Texas plates? What if the neighborhood hadn't been as nice? What if it were a few years later and we had young children with us? Would we have still stopped? I don't know. We might have found good reasons not to.

But the Good News for all of us is, Jesus acts differently. All though his ministry, Jesus helped those who needed his help. Jesus associated with lowlifes, whom the religious authorities would have nothing to do with. Jesus put himself at risk. And Jesus is eventually killed.

In a real way, the Good Samaritan is the Good Shepherd in disguise.

We who have been left for dead by the power of sin, have been rescued. Jesus binds our wounds, and Jesus pays the ultimate price to help us. And like the man, we have done nothing to deserve this kind of treatment. We have done nothing to deserve this love. It is given to us freely. It is given to us as a gift.

Though we all too often look out for our own interests, and ignore the needs of others, Jesus calls us to act as he does. He doesn't call us to act in ways that make sense from the world's standpoint. He calls us to give of ourselves for the sake of others.

I was at camp this past week, and wasn't able watch extended coverage of the horrific events which happened in our country.

But in trying to catch up, one of the most helpful things I found was a conversation between former speaker Newt Gingrich and liberal commentator Van Jones. The two of them used to square off against each other on CNN's "Crossfire." But Friday they recorded a 22-minute conversation about ways to come together across the lines that divide us in our country these days. I have posted a link to the St. Paul's Facebook page and would commend it to you.

One of the most helpful things I heard was needing to reach out to that person you know, that co-worker, that uncle, that person who has views diametrically opposed to yours. Then during the next 6 months make that person one of the most important conversation partners you have. Try to find common ground where you can. Try to understand the other. Reach out across the lines that divide us, especially in this very divisive season of our country's history.

Jesus tells of a hated Samaritan who reached out to help a Jew. And Jesus uses that as the model of what we are called to do.

Jesus calls us to show mercy, just as he has shown mercy to us. Jesus calls us to help those who need our help, regardless of whether it's convenient to do so.

It's an incredibly high standard Jesus is calling us to. But the fact remains, though it wasn't convenient, or easy, Jesus has shown us mercy. And he calls us to do the same. You know the law, now do it.