

Message
February 12-13, 2011
Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Luke 10:25-42
What's the Right Thing to Do?

In 1955 the civil rights movement began with one African American woman who refused to give up her seat. Rosa Parks lived and worked in her neighborhood of Montgomery, Alabama. One afternoon, she boarded the city bus after a long day working as a seamstress in a local department store. A white passenger boarded the bus and the driver ordered Rosa to stand and give up her seat. Rosa refused, violating the city ordinance. She was arrested. Rosa's arrest led to 382 days of a city wide bus boycott. The action was heard and seen across the country. Rosa's rebellion eventually led to the Supreme Court's decision outlawing racial segregation. Some say Rosa Parks wouldn't give up her seat because she was tired after a long days work. But, Rosa had been raised to value self worth and overcome fear by doing what was just and right. She refused to give up her seat because it was the right thing to do for herself and for her neighbor.

Sometimes it is that doing the right thing is not the most popular thing. Sometimes doing the right thing is not what we've been doing; not what the system or the culture dictates, but, because we're faithful people, doing the right thing is what we're called to do.

Today, we continue with The Big Read, our plunge into the gospel of Luke. We're looking at two very popular and familiar stories, only in the gospel of Luke, the Good Samaritan and Mary and Martha. At first glance, we have to ask, what do they have in common? Jesus teaches us: these are neighbors, sisters, just trying their best to do the right thing. Then, he challenges us, to ask ourselves: *what is the right thing to do?* So, when today's story opens we're introduced to at least a half dozen people, all trying to do the right thing: a lawyer, a priest, a Levite, a Samaritan, and sisters, Mary and Martha. We're in the thick of Jesus' travel narrative in this chapter 10 of Luke's gospel. Travel for Luke's writer is important. This isn't leisurely, vacation travel. This is Jesus' resolute and purposeful journey to Jerusalem, where he will, for us, give his life so that we may have life eternal. He's spreading his message of God's kingdom, present with us now. Just before today's story, Jesus gives thanks that the kingdom is made known; not just to the learned and scholarly...but, in fact, God makes the kingdom known to the innocent newcomers.

The crowd surrounding Jesus is growing. Ironically, among the crowd is a learned and scholarly lawyer. Lawyers in Jesus' time are well versed in the law; just like they are today. But, the Law in Jesus' time is the Mosaic Law, the Law of God. And lawyers operate as watchdogs for the temple Pharisees, priests and scribes. They're checking to make sure faithful citizens are abiding by the Mosaic Law. This lawyer pushes through the crowd, anxious to exert his authority and show who's in control. He's more than just put out. He's actually built up some hostility toward Jesus. It seems Jesus' message is threatening to all he knows and all he is. So, in an effort to do the right thing, the lawyer plans to catch Jesus in an act of heresy. The lawyer and Jesus begin a debate. The lawyer, hoping to catch Jesus asks, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus,

counters with, “what is written in the Law?” Back and forth they volley as Jesus cleverly leads the lawyer to uncover the answer for himself, and then challenges him to go and do: love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself. More counter attack. “Who is my neighbor,” the lawyer asks? Neighbors in ancient times are those who share the same heritage, those of the same race, those who are just alike, who think alike, look alike. In fact, the ancient Mosaic Law books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus refer to neighbors as fellow Jews; the chosen race of God made holy. See, the lawyer knows the law. And he knows that inheriting eternal life is relegated to only those covenant people with God, like himself.

But, in God’s kingdom, neighbor is defined differently. In an effort to help the lawyer come to know the glory of God’s kingdom, Jesus redefines neighbor. He tells the story of the Good Samaritan. Keep in mind, that no where in the story is the word “good” mentioned. It seems that it’s just our tendency to judge. What’s good and what’s bad. The truth is the story is about good people, all trying to do the right thing. A man is robbed and beaten along the road. To say nothing about robbers, the 17 mile road from Jerusalem to Jericho descends nearly 3,300 feet and it’s treacherous. It’s winding and curvey and narrows along the way making for good hiding places for bandits. We know nothing about the man robbed and beaten. But, if you’re traveling along this road, you’re probably taking care of business. This is not a leisurely walk. And, customarily, because the road has a reputation for danger, people tend to take the walk in pairs, or travel in caravans. Interesting for us, though, Jesus tells the story of all four men taking the road alone, without neighborly support. Regardless, what Jesus does teach us is, each and every man is in the direction of doing what he believes to be right. The man is left for dead. The priest and the Levite, in an effort to do the right thing, actually pass him by. They’re both very religious, well schooled in the Law, which states that they will be left unclean for 7 days should they touch a dead man (Numbers 19:11). If unclean, they can’t perform their duties in the temple. They’re not about to risk their position on the hierarchal ladder of temple authority. To pass by the apparently dead man seems the right thing to do, according to the Law! And, for this faithful priest and Levite, honoring the Law is honoring God.

Then, a Samaritan comes along. Now, think of the person you like least. The person who challenges every belief you hold. The one whom you’ll never see eye to eye with, and basically, you really hate this person. This is the Samaritan. Typical of Jesus in Luke’s gospel, it’s through these we least expect that Jesus reveals to us God’s true desire for us. But, it makes us uncomfortable. Doing the right thing doesn’t always look so neat and tidy. Doing the right thing may mean we turn away from old ways to turn toward God’s ways. We remember that Jews hate Samaritans, a tension that still exists today. If we’re looking at a map of the Palestinian region, Samaria is the area in the middle, between Galilee in the north and Judea in the south. The people of Judea and Samaria both understood themselves to be the true inheritors of God’s promises. Both saw themselves as God’s chosen. Both Israelites and Samaritans believe God dwells on their individual homelands. Even today, traveling the direct route from Galilee to Jerusalem takes you through the tension filled West Bank. So, like Jesus, the safe route

to travel is down the banks of the Jordan, making a cut across from Jericho to Jerusalem. When Jesus tells the lawyer of the Samaritan coming along, he knows the lawyer knows exactly who he's talking about: the one least expected to befriend. In fact, this Samaritan is the epitome of Jesus' redefining of neighbor. The hated Samaritan has it within his heart to do the right thing. Caring for the wounded man, he carts him off to the inn. It seems the innkeeper has a relationship with the Samaritan. He doesn't appear to have any qualms about the Samaritan leaving the wounded man in his care. Generously offering up two days wages, he agrees to cover any other expenses upon his return.

See, everyone's just trying to do the right thing: the lawyer, the priest, the Levite, the Samaritan, the innkeeper, the wounded man, you, me...we're just all trying to do what is right and good. And, Jesus challenges us to really examine what is right. He unfolds the answer by letting the lawyer learn from what he already knows. "What must I do," the lawyer asks? And, before he barely sucks on the next breath, he knows...Love. Well, love costs; we spend our money, our time, our presence, our attention, our convenience. Love costs us something Jesus says.

A faithful soul tells of a story of a young man, in the company of an elderly, well experienced priest. Together they spend a day providing the noonday meal serving in a homeless shelter. For some reason, the line was unusually long that day. Finally, at 3:00 p.m., trying to hide his exhaustion, the young man was relieved to see the last guest out the door. Just as he was throwing the dead bolt on the door, one lone homeless man stumbles up the sidewalk with a look of hopefulness on his face. Seeing the man, the young man, exhausted from a particularly trying day of service, lets out a "Jesus !?" The old priest, standing nearby, having heard, says, "it just might be."

Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these,...you did it to me."

Finishing his story, Jesus tells the lawyer to...go and do.

Following Jesus isn't about memorizing all the rules and sticking to each and every letter. Following Jesus is about doing. Which is exactly what Mary and Martha are doing. But, what they're doing isn't the same. Mary sits attentively at Jesus' feet while Martha frantically cooks and cleans and prepares Jesus' visit. Both are doing the right thing. We're reminded that hospitality is extending our most gracious time and attention to our every guest. Martha in her busi-ness and Mary in her quiet, both extend hospitality. Martha wants Jesus' visit to be perfect. She blurts out to Jesus her frustration with Mary, breaking a code. You do not air your family business to guests. Mary, also breaking the code, is acting like a man. As she sits in the common area of the home, reserved only for men, and at the feet of Jesus, soaking up all the learning, reserved only for men, she defies the custom of her people. Breaking the rules, both are trying to do the right thing.

Sometimes it is that in going and doing the right thing, might look a little lawless and messy and not so ordered and by the book. When Rosa Parks got on that bus that December day in 1955, maybe it is she just decided she couldn't wait any more for one more law to be written, one more rule to be carved to grant her what God already promised: that she is a child of God, loved and cherished. Instead, she did the right thing, she acted as a sign of God's love. Because when we love, which is what we're talking about here, doing the right thing is simply loving the way God asks us to love; it's gloriously risky and we're going to pay a price.

May we decide to go and do. See, Jesus tells us this story because he loves us. He loves us enough to believe in us. He loves us enough to challenge us. He loves us enough to die on the cross for us and rise from the dead so that we can know the full impact of his love. Now, we can admire what Jesus did for us. Actually, it's extraordinary, phenomenal, amazing, beyond anything we can comprehend, his love for us. But, he's not asking us to stand on the side of the road simply observing. We're not intended to simply sit back and gaze at the wonder of how he loves us. He's asking us to take the leap of faith to be uncomfortable in action, with his love. Maybe, it's time to stop thinking about the right thing to do, and go and do the right thing. Pay the price of loving. Jesus loves Christ Church, and calls us to step beyond our comfort zone. May we continue always to seek out the lost, the forgotten and even the hated. May we decide to serve as a beacon of light in the world and perhaps, even more importantly right now, in our neighborhood of the city of Richmond, and closer in our neighborhood of Short Pump. Maybe this week, we go and do in the simplest of ways, but where all too often, it's just so difficult. This week, perhaps it is that we show love and mercy to our coworker, our family member, our classmate, our neighbor just a few doors down, the one we really don't like, we really don't want to cozy up to. Maybe this week, we give it a try and look for the face of Jesus.

Just as soon as Jesus finishes visiting with the lawyer and Mary and Martha, he begins teaching his disciples how to pray. At first the leap to prayer seems disjointed in the gospel. But, perhaps it is that Luke's writer wants us to know that Jesus' instruction for us to go and do the right thing in our loving, requires a change of heart, a different way of being, and that most definitely requires prayer.

So, we have some things to do this week, my friends. Begin boldly, decide to go and do in love, and center all our actions in prayer with Jesus. There's a price for loving as Jesus loves. It's worth it. It's the right thing to do. May we give thanks and glory to Jesus that he calls us, calls us to be bold and courageous, to reach out where it's especially difficult and even unfriendly; to live with God's law, not just on our hearts, but on our lips and most especially in our hands and feet, as we show compassion and mercy. Go and do, says Jesus...it's the right thing to do, and may we never forget that we go and do with Jesus' love always carrying us.