

Preparing to Have My Mind Changed

Luke 10:25-29

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First Baptist Church, Pottstown

Rev. Dr. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

Don't you just love it when you know the right answer?! I do! A few weeks ago, I caught one night of the Jeopardy Greatest of All Time Championship. "Consider(-ed)... to be the ultimate tournament of champions,... the three best and winningest players in the modern version of the game's 36-year history — Ken Jennings, Brad Rutter and James Holzhauer — battled to become known as the GOAT player."ⁱ (You know "GOAT"? Greatest Of All Time, right?) While I certainly couldn't begin to keep up with the knowledge and speed of those three guys, it was fun to get a few answers right every now and then; that's why people love to watch!

On my way to church every Sunday morning, if I time it right, I can catch the "puzzle" on NPR. It's a good thing I drive alone because I am often traveling up 422, spitting out the answers to the puzzles, along with and sometimes before, the person playing the game. Of course, there are plenty of times I am wrong and have no clue, relieved it's not me in the spot light or on the radio! But getting it right? It makes me feel smart and sure, like I am "all that!"

I wonder if that's how the lawyer who comes to Jesus in Luke's account in chapter 10 felt when he asked Jesus a question he clearly knew the answer to. He asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus responds, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" Of course, the man's answer is now very familiar to us; say it with me! *You know the answer!* "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 you shall love your neighbor as yourself." See, doesn't it feel great to be right?!

Now Luke says that the man asked Jesus this question because he wanted to “trap” or “test” him; but scholars argue that this was exactly the kind of exchange that teachers and students of the law had with each other all the time. The goal is to figure out what exactly this law means, how it’s applied in actual life matters. Because they agree on the law itself, the question comes next is the key here: “Who is my neighbor?” Without knowing the answer to that, it really isn’t clear what it means to follow and embody this truth.

I’ve told you that I like to be right; I think mostly we all do. So, I have also to confess that when I read this text I think I know who is “right” in the story, and of course, who I would imagine myself to be! The Samaritan, of course! Surely, I wouldn’t be the priest who walks by on the other side; or the Levite either! So, we already know the right answer! Which is why I assigned you roles to play a few weeks ago when we investigated the text more closely; few of us would *volunteer* to be the one who didn’t do what we all *know* we should do! The problem for me, of course, is that in real life, which was what this really *was* all about, I don’t actually do what the Samaritan did. Or at least I struggle mightily with it. I am beginning to like the lawyer more and more: he knows the answer, really he does, but he can also admit that he needs to be reminded, to be told again and again, what one *really* must do to be an embodiment of our faith, to be a disciple of Jesus in everyday life.

Last Sunday, Jeanne and Deb and I had a chance to be the “Good Samaritan”, before we could even get out the door of the church! A person without a home came to ask for money for a hotel room, and we had to decide whether to send him out into the cold for the night or to address his situation. Part of me just wanted him to go away; I had had a similar encounter with him earlier in the week and thought that by responding to him then, I might be done with him. Ha! Not so fast!

So, Deb made a lot of phone calls, and Jeanne and I talked with him while we waited for information. (He worried that we might be calling the police). We gave him leftovers from our lunch that day—sandwiches and pretzels and cookies and water, and Deb arranged a spot for him at the shelter at Zions that night. We worked out where he could go to get in out of the cold for the afternoon, and eventually he left. Then we spent the next 30 minutes talking about how hard it is to live out Jesus-stuff in everyday life; were we Samaritans or not? He didn't get what he came for, but he didn't go away empty either. We solved the “problem” for the moment but what about the next day and the day after that? What was the right answer? I didn't know.

Taking seriously what it means to be a follower of Jesus is never as clear as we might want it to be. People are messy to deal with! And because having the right answer is always so satisfying, it's difficult to be stymied, even more to be wrong. As we look at our community and see and hear about the needs in our neighborhoods, it's challenging to figure out what the right response might be...*where* do we start? *How* do we start? What does the law of God's love and grace say? It appears to take more than knowing the right answers to live our faith.

As we prepare for our retreat at the end of this week, I want us to think about the possibility that we might ask a lot of questions that we don't know the answers to. How are we going to feel about that? We might also be determined to *know* what the answer is (a great defense is an awesome offence!) or to *think* we know because that feels more comfortable, more familiar, more reassuring. But maybe we need to live in that liminal space of unknowing for a while, in order to listen carefully to God's Spirit. If we don't, we will tell ourselves the stories we want to hear, make up the answers to the questions ourselves without the input of those who really know, and in the end, wind up only serving our own ego needs, and not the genuine needs of another or our community.

One of the things I've asked Marcia to talk about with us if there is time is a consensus model of decision making. She has used this for years and is writing something about it these days. It comes from the Quaker tradition and it creates space for openness, for changing our minds, for curiosity as we seek to discern the will and way of God.

Consensus building is just what it sounds like. It is a process entered into with an open heart, being fully present and fully expecting that in the process of coming to agreement on something, *our* minds might be changed. That's much different than entering a conversation with the agenda to change the mind of someone else! For example, what if Democrats and Republicans sat down to talk with one another with no other agenda other than to fully understand the other's position, of having our minds changed about one another, not our usual antagonistic experience.

Consensus building takes time; there's lots of listening and talking, there's explanations and questioning, there's seeking answers and considering all the possibilities at hand. It invites curiosity, creativity and honesty. While the ultimate goal is one answer, in the end there is always room for everyone: you can agree, you can agree with reservation, you can disagree but not hold up the group from going ahead. There is room for all!

After our experience with our homeless neighbor last Sunday, Deb and I spent two hours at Zions, where the shelter has been held in January, talking with Rev. Kork Moyer about this important ministry of providing not just safe shelter, but food and prayer and guidance and accountability and the opportunity to move in to permanent housing for the large population of homeless men, women and children who live in our city. I wanted him to tell me what I should do, what I should say when folks come to our doors. I wanted him to tell me how to be a good neighbor. I wanted him to teach me to be a Samaritan! And after two hours of conversation, he said, "I know I haven't answered your questions." And I said, "No. But maybe what you have

shown me is that I need to keep asking, every day, and every minute in every circumstance, what it means to be Jesus in that moment.” “Yes,” he replied. “That’s the *only* question, isn’t it?”

Franciscan friar Richard Rohr put it this way: “God did not say ‘Be right’; God said, ‘Be in love.’” Be in love with God! Be in love with yourself! Be in love with your neighbor! The whole point isn’t to be right! *It’s to love.*

Jesus us showed us how easy and how complicated, how straightforward and how transformative love can be. Our call isn’t to be right; it’s to love. As we prepare for this weekend of discernment, I pray that each day this week, you will seek God in prayer. That you will ask for an open mind and an open heart in order to hear the voice of God *and* the voice of our neighbors. And finally pray that you will “be in love”: with God, with yourself and with all our neighbors.

Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.sportingnews.com/us/other-sports/news/jeopardy-greatest-of-all-time-tournament-results-winners/mqdau7w0ftnc1n3dr83703wi8>