

One of those get-acquainted questions for the beginning of school for the third grade class. Who are the three most important people in your life? Answer: me, myself, and I.

Gee, sounds like some Christians I know. Gee, sounds like me from time to time. We place ourselves at the center of it all, as if we are all that matter, even in our faith life. Today Jesus invites us to see that there is more to faith than just me, myself, and I.

Now our Scripture lesson this morning is very familiar. Maybe too familiar. We read it, realize we have heard it before, and remind ourselves that next time we see a car stranded by the road we really should call 911.

Or maybe it brings to mind a time when we were that guy in the ditch and someone came along to help us. This parable always brings to my mind the time I was stranded in the middle of Asbury Park, New Jersey after midnight on a summer night in 1974 or thereabouts. Back then, in my college days, I worked for my brother at a hotel on the Jersey Shore. He drove an American Motors car, an Ambassador. American Motors has since gone out of business, and I think I know why.

The vehicle really wasn't very good, but it was better than mine, whose brand name was Schwinn. When all you've got is a bicycle, even an Ambassador seems pretty good. So, what I would do, when the Cincinnati Reds made their trip east, I would take in one game in Philadelphia and then three days later catch the Reds at Shea Stadium in New York. Both trips less than two hours. For the Philadelphia trip, my brother said, "Don't get a flat tire." -- "Why not, don't you have a spare?" -- "Yes, but the key to the trunk doesn't work."

And then the trip to New York. Good trip. Reds won. And I'm heading back, and in the dilapidated part of Asbury Park, the red light goes on. Overheating. I get out of the car, see

water dripping from the radiator. I'm alone.

If I had had a bucket in the trunk maybe I could have gotten some water somewhere, but if you remember that trunk wouldn't open anyway.

I could have called on my cell phone, except that cell phones hadn't been invented. And then suddenly this great big teenager materializes out of the darkness that is Asbury Park. And comes up to me.

I'm scared, mentally preparing to say goodbye to my wallet. At the least. He says, "Here's your problem. Your radiator has a leak." – Well, yes. – "Wait right here." As if I had an Option B. And he saunters off, I'm thinking he's gone to get some of his friends and I'm wondering how long it takes to strip an Ambassador, but then he returns with an incredibly large bucket filled with water. Enough to get me the rest of the way, ten more miles or so. I offer to pay him, but he says, "No, the water didn't cost me anything, I got it from my neighbors faucet."

Was he a Christian? Who knows? But that night I believed Christ looked upon him with approval.

Because that night his life was about something more than me, myself, and I. He had reached out to an unknown nameless "him," driving a broken down Ambassador stuck in the darkness of Asbury Park, New Jersey. And this unknown young man claimed me as a neighbor and did what he could to help me.

And if someone had said to me, "How lucky you were to run into a GOOD ghetto resident," I think that would have agreed, but then the premise would have bothered me: that this man was the exception rather than the rule. Keep this image in mind as we turn to our Scripture.

A scribe, a man trained in Law, both secular and religious, poses to Jesus the ultimate Me, myself, and I question: *What must I do to inherit eternal life?* It's an important question and it is

an essential part of our spiritual journey. We Christians know the answer: eternal life is a gift given through Jesus' incredible love for us, that though we are imperfect folk, he died on the cross and in this sacrificial love we find the promise of eternal life. Eternal life isn't something we earn. It's a gift.

But perhaps surprisingly, Jesus does not steer the conversation in this direction. Instead, Jesus, good teacher that he is, wants to listen to this man's understanding of what it means to live a life that is consistent with a life that bears witness to eternal blessing.

*The goal of faith is not to get to heaven, but rather to live as God's people in the meantime.*

And the man has the beginning of a good answer. One that takes him beyond me, myself, and I. *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and your neighbor as yourself.* Good answer, in fact a great answer. For nowhere in the Old Testament are these phrases found bound together in the same sentence or verse. But by Jesus' time these phrases had often been joined together and this is what the scribe has done.

He has seen that love of God and love of neighbor are related to each other in an important way. If you love God, you must love your neighbor. You can't have the one without the other. And if you love your neighbor, well then somehow you are showing your love for God.

The writer James Baldwin wrote, "If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of him."

Faith isn't just about me. It's about him or her or them. It's also about taking care of your neighbor. This is what this Scribe understands and Jesus is well-pleased with him. *You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.*

But the scribe can't leave well-enough alone. He makes one more comment, that shows that

his interest might not be so much in living a life that helps his neighbor as he is in debating theological positions. Or maybe he just wants to trick Jesus into saying something that the authorities would condemn. So he asks, “OK, but Jesus, who is my neighbor?”

And by his answer, Jesus tells us that the question of eternal life is not the only important spiritual question. Jesus isn't so concerned that the scribe get his doctrine right, as he is that he gets his heart right, and lives a life that has been touched by God's eternal love.

And so the story. A certain guy is going from Jerusalem to Jericho. By implication, we assume he is Jewish. We don't know. He could have been anybody. Or a nobody. That's the point. He was just a guy lying in a ditch, beaten up, robbed, and left for dead.

A priest and another order of priest, a Levite, see him, but pass by on the other side. Jesus neither justifies nor explains nor condemns their action.

Now, if we are going to define anyone as “good” in this Parable, the priest and the Levite are good. Good, as opposed to Godly, as opposed to merciful, as opposed to compassionate.

If we want to keep playing with pronouns, I would surmise that they have a “we” or “us” faith. They are on their way to worship, to serve their congregation, if you will. They serve their own people faithfully. “We have to take care of ourselves and our own.” If they had touched blood, and the man in the ditch was wounded, then they could not have performed the tasks at the temple assigned to them. They were good. They were following the rules, the tradition.

And now along comes a Samaritan. Now, you have to understand what the audience is expecting. If it was bad with the priest and the Levite passing by, it was going to get really, really, bad with the Samaritan. That's where the audience thought the story would be heading.

Because, you see, Samaritans were folks who considered to be mongrels and heretics by the religious people of Jesus' day. They were like dandelions on a lawn or ants at a picnic or Blue

Devils at a Ram's Club meeting, or hippies (remember them) in a Marine Corps barracks. They worshiped in the wrong place and only believed in five books of the Bible, and all in all, didn't measure up spiritually.

For a Jewish person to call another Jewish person a Samaritan. . . why those were fighting words.

But notice. . . A *good* Samaritan? Jesus doesn't call him that. Doesn't say he's good, bad, wonderful or whatever. He's just a Samaritan. To call him "good" is to make him the exception. And to call him "good" leads us away from Jesus' point: Jesus' point is that Godliness, living in response to God, can be found in places we do not expect.

The Jews considered Samaritans, unclean, ungodly, other, less, but Jesus portrays him not as good, not as exceptional, but simply as one who knows what God expects of us, when tradition and culture and expectations are swept aside.

This Samaritan is so extravagant with his care for this guy, this unknown "him." This stranger. Pays for a hotel room, binds his wounds. For no reason at all, except that this guy was in need and this Samaritan had a heart filled with care and mercy and compassion.

*What must I do to inherit eternal life?* An important question for me, myself, and I. But in today's Scripture at least, Jesus indicates that an even more important question is this: what does it mean for you and me to live as a neighbor to all the hims and hers and thems in this world, who find themselves lying in a ditch somewhere?

You see, the Samaritan becomes our example, not because he did the right thing, but because he did the Jesus thing.

And so it is that Jesus doesn't want us to be good. He wants us to be his.

And two thousand years later, if someone like that lived on the wrong side of the tracks in Asbury Park, and was out late at night doing who knows what – yet brings a bucket of water to a stranded motorist, Jesus would say: *now that's a neighbor.*

And then Jesus instructs you and me, “Go and do likewise.”

Amen.