

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
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Amos 7:7–17
Luke 10:25–37

WHEN WE BECOME THE BREAD AND WINE

The question is: What must I do to inherit eternal life?

We know this story well. I would propose we know this story *too* well. But the question which prompts Jesus to tell the parable of the Samaritan is the question we are most likely to neglect. And it is a question that we should be pursuing in everything we do, and especially in the way in which we are a body—many members with one purpose. What must we do to be a part of what God is doing? Starting now and going on forever, what must we do to inherit eternal life?

It's a good question. The language in Luke indicates that Jesus and the lawyer are enjoying their conversation. All the words are polite. They are respectful. Teacher, what must I do? There's deference in recognizing the value, of discussing the Torah with one another. And Jesus and this lawyer seem to be playing the games that rabbis played when they wanted to understand something. They would say "Yes, but..." often to one another. And just as the lawyer compliments Jesus by calling him "teacher," Jesus returns the compliment to the lawyer.

I wonder why we take our sensibilities and impose on this passage an adversarial atmosphere between Jesus and the lawyer. Their very first words to one another are inviting. They are engaging in that which is mutually beneficial. Teacher, what must I do? "Well, tell me; how do you read the Torah? I'm interested in your opinion, too," Jesus is saying. And when the lawyer responds to Jesus, he's not scolded for missing the point or lacking an understanding, Jesus says, as if in affirmation, "Do this and you will live."

Jesus is encouraging. He's encouraging that lawyer that day, and he is encouraging us. He's encouraging us to allow our faith to be relevant. He is engaging us, welcoming us, despite our prejudices. There's nothing here that is contentious. There's nothing in this that is contentious at all. But what are the absolutes in this story line? What are the plumb line verses that bring out what we are supposed to hear today?

What must I do to inherit eternal life? And who is my neighbor? Jesus' responses: "How do you interpret scripture? And which of these three was a neighbor?" We know that this lawyer would not empathize with the Samaritan. But he also would not have much desire to identify with the priest or the Levite, either. Within the Jewish tradition, the lawyers and the priests represented different schools of thought. They interpreted scripture very differently. If we think that conservative and liberals look at the Bible differently, we can't imagine how much further apart the lawyers and the priest were. It was a class division. They practiced their faith in different ways. Jesus wants this lawyer to find himself in the story. So if it's not with the priest or the Levite, if it's not with the Samaritan,

where does this story become relevant for this lawyer in today's parable? There's only one point of entry left. It's with that person lying half dead on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho.

If we allow ourselves just for a moment to reconsider our understanding of the parable of the good Samaritan. (By the way, where does it say "good" in our reading?) If we allow ourselves to look at this story again and at this celebration of Jesus death and resurrection, where will we plug in? Where will we become the bread and the wine today? Where will we receive the mercy that is offered to us in such abundance—the mercy that's offered not only to us, but to those we least expect? I doubt we have ever read this story and seen the meaning from the perspective of the one that is wounded. We keep a safe distance, just as the priest and the Levite did, because we don't want to be guilty of seeming too self-righteous. We keep all our racism and our biases hidden beneath the surface, and we don't allow our *self* into the story as the lawyer who had to look up and see a Samaritan helping him. I guess the closest we could imagine is a devout Hasidic Jew finding himself in need and a Palestinian coming to his aid.

What we need today, we are very unlikely to risk because it is a near-death experience, just as this celebration of communion is a near-death experience for us. But when we take this story as Jesus intended, we recognize it's about the unity we share in Christ despite our world view.

When we hear this story anew, we will hear the importance of being willing to receive compassion. For all our lives we've heard the story of the good Samaritan and thought it was about sharing compassion. You cannot share what you have not received. Imagine the surprise on that lawyer's thinking when he left that conversation. Imagine that he has received understanding, but why by a Samaritan, the last person on earth he would want as his neighbor.

And so, in the rest of this service, I'm encouraging you to consider yourself as other than the good Samaritan, which is where all Presbyterians, I think, would place themselves. Allow Jesus to be your Samaritan. After all, only Christ was capable of being truly good. And then as you receive the mercy offered in his selfless and self-extending act on the cross, you will be offered the opportunity to be vulnerable, to give up some of the carefully orchestrated control that we all maintain—some of the safeguards; some of the stockpile of security—and you'll be offered something much more precious: the opportunity to inherit eternal life. We come here to learn and practice being more Christ-like. But before we can do that, we have to receive the compassion that God has for us and find where we are in our journey. Paul said it in Second Corinthians, the fifth chapter, 15th verse, "He died for all so that those who live (us) might live no longer for themselves but for him."

So our struggle is not one of understanding this parable, after all, is it? It's really one of performance. Where will we be? How close to dying to sin and rising to new life are we really? Go and do likewise, Jesus says. Do this and you will live. Amen.