

# HEART KNOWLEDGE

Luke 10:25-37; 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary time, c  
July 10, 2016  
Stephen R. Montgomery

*Prayer: Startle us, O God, with your truth, and open our hearts and minds to your Word, that hearing we might believe, and believing, live into the love you have shown us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

One day a man asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” He didn’t ask “What is going to happen to me after I die?” which some think is the quintessential religious question, but isn’t. Rather, its “how can I live my life fully, every day of it, in the present?” He was a lawyer. “What does the law say?” Jesus asked in return.

The lawyer knows that this is his turf, his home field advantage, because he knew the law. He’s heard Leviticus 19 all his life. “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”

And I’m sure he knew this law in the same chapter: “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.”

That’s pretty clear, isn’t it? And rather simple, or so it seems. Who is your neighbor? “Your people” and the “aliens” who are to be as your people. Foreigners are as citizens in this God-land. Could this be any more explicit? Further, understanding this divine truth and acting on it is a matter of life and death—not just for the alien, but all of us. The lawyer knew this too.

“You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live. I am the Lord.”  
(That’s Leviticus 18)

And that’s when Jesus told the story that has become perhaps the essence of Christianity; that if we are asked what our religion is all about—and we are asked every day in many ways by our secular culture—we can’t go wrong if we tell this simple story of the Good Samaritan.

But it’s not simple at all, really. It has nuances and subtleties, like any good short story. A man was walking from Jerusalem to Jericho. It’s a 17 mile trek through deep treacherous ravines. The area around it is called wilderness, dry, arid, uninhabited, and is dangerous, the haunt of highway robbers.

So the man is mugged, beaten, stripped of everything he owns, including the clothes on his back, left lying, unconscious, in the ditch beside the road. Two religious people, a priest and a

Levite pass on by. They are the villains of the story, of course. But, being a religious person you knew I had to come to their defense! ... there were probably good reasons. They probably had important meetings, maybe even worship, to attend to. Maybe the man is dead, and if they touch him, they will be legally unclean and would have to return to the temple in Jerusalem for the cleansing ritual before going back to work. They knew the law. Or maybe, --and this is what bothers us — they are like so many of us, not bad people, just preoccupied, busy, don't want to get involved. They might have even offered "thoughts and prayers" on behalf of the man in the ditch.

And then, I think most of you know the rest of the story. There is that Samaritan who stops, takes the man to an inn, pays the bill, and assures the innkeeper that he will return and pay whatever balance there is.

This story has become so sentimental that we forget the kind of enmity there was between Jews and Samaritans. They hated each other. It was a particularly virulent, toxic kind of hatred, that special hatred that gets going when fueled by tribalism, racism, religion, and ideology. We know something of that, don't we?

"Which of these three," Jesus asked the lawyer, "was a neighbor to the man who fell among robbers?" Did you note the lawyer's response? He couldn't even bear to admit it was the Samaritan. He didn't pronounce that word. "The one who showed mercy," "the one who showed kindness and compassion." "Go and do likewise," Jesus said.

Here's what happened: the question the lawyer asked was theoretical, abstract: "Who is my neighbor? Give me a definition of the neighbor I'm supposed to love in order to live fully." He wanted some outside limits. You can't love everyone, after all. There have to be boundaries.

So Jesus didn't answer the question. Instead he re-defined a neighbor as anyone who needs you, anyone who is in trouble, anyone who is lying in a ditch, literally or figuratively, even a person you have every reason to despise. The man in the ditch may be half-dead, but the ones who pass him by are the walking dead.<sup>1</sup>

The lawyer knew the law, and he knew his history. He knew what happened after the giving of the law to the people of Israel. They became hard-hearted, like Pharaoh; they did not keep the ordinances and laws. They didn't live fully and look after their neighbor. As a result, Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians; the temple was destroyed, and the people were taken to Babylon to work as slaves. And Ezekiel, another prophet that the lawyer knew about, wrote "But the children rebelled against me; they did not follow my statutes, and were not careful to observe my ordinances, by whose observance *everyone* shall live."

Did you catch that inclusivity in Ezekiel's words? Following those God-given statutes means life for everyone. Failing to follow them brings everyone down—the ditch dwellers and the passers-by alike.

The victim is half-dead, the merciless are the walking dead. The combination is one of mutual destruction.<sup>2</sup>

And the tendency of many of us is to take a look at this parable as a sentimental “do the right thing” story. It is that, to be sure. It should prompt us to stop and help, or at least not step over those hurting in our paths. However, it goes much further, as Jesus always does. It is a living, breathing example of “you have heard it said, but I say,” teaching.

Jesus knows this lawyer knows his scripture. But the issue isn’t head knowledge. It is heart knowledge. This isn’t so much about eternal life as it is about abundant life, genuine life, actual life and death for everyone, not just in the heavenly future, but in the earthly now.<sup>3</sup>

Heart knowledge in the earthly now. I wish I knew what that looked like today in our world. Who is my neighbor? Where do we begin? The refugee in the camp, half-dead? The victims of the Orlando shooting, tragically dead? Those reeling from bombs in Istanbul and Iraq—they’re like the ones beaten and left for dead.

But this week it all hit home, didn’t it? A nation reeling from senseless violent acts. Two African American men, apparently shot by police for no good reason. Then on Thursday night, the killing of 5 officers who were simply guarding what had been a peaceful protest. Horrible. But when the news is horrible, God calls the church to reflect “good news,” to find out where God is in all of this mess. When people are alienated, God calls the church to engage in “ministries of reconciliation.” When hostility breaks out between peoples, God calls the church to live out its conviction that Christ has torn down the dividing wall of hostility.

I don’t know all that this means for you, or for our country, but practically, here is what it means for me to have heart knowledge in the earthly now:

### **The gospel calls us to listen.**

Listening is the first expression of love. Conservatives need to listen to liberals. Liberals need to listen to conservatives. That goes for everyone. Have you ever listened to an African American parent talk about instructions they have to give their sons about walking in the neighborhood, being stopped on a sidewalk, or driving a car? All of us parents have had to do that, but it is different for black parents.

In the same manner, have you ever listened to a police officer explain what it is like to be targeted because of the actions of a few, and how the heart beats a little faster whenever they have to pull someone over on the road and approach that car? I did that just this week.

We need to listen, and whites especially need to listen to our black brothers and sisters. For those of us who have attempted to do that, the events this past week come as no surprise. We need to listen because those of us who are white find it nearly impossible to imagine what life

is like for people of color. That's part of the brokenness of the human condition. There is more pain and fear in the black community than we have imagined.

Listening also means reading books by people of color. Ta-Nehisi Coates, in his *Between the World and Me* and Bryan Stevenson, in his *Just Mercy*, ought to be on the reading lists of every book club in America. And there is a new book out this summer which will be a part of my summer reading, *Homecoming*, by Yaa Gyasi, a novel by a young African American writer. I must warn you, these are painful to read sometimes, but necessary if we are to try to understand the fear, the disillusionment and the pain of the African American experience.

### **Secondly, we need to work.**

We need to persevere. The answers are not easy nor quickly settled. They are complex. But, for example, the current unrest cannot be understood apart from developments in our criminal justice system that cry out for reform. In a few short decades America went from being a nation with one of the lowest incarceration rates in the developed world to being the nation with the highest incarceration rate. Many in our penal system are half-dead, left by the side of the road, and the highest percentage are people of color. Imagine the effect that has in our black and Latino communities...the family, the economics. That's just one of the many areas of reform that are needed. I won't even get into our insane gun culture. But it means working, getting involved in the political process. It takes more than just thoughts and prayers.

### **Thirdly, the gospel should inspire a sense of hope.**

The year was 1968, and the nation was torn apart at the seams greater than any time since the Civil War. Hundreds of urban riots were taking place. The country was torn over a divisive war with no end. The nation was still reeling from the assassinations of John Kennedy, Malcolm X., Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr., and soon Robert Kennedy. And we were gearing up for two political conventions. One song captured the time, entitled "The Eve of Destruction." We had hoped that some of these issues would be laid to rest. But sin is sin. Evil is real. Violence still begets violence. But we do not despair.

One of the most poignant moments in that year occurred the night Martin Luther King was shot and killed. Robert Kennedy was in Indianapolis and he was urged not to speak, but with no notes and extemporaneous eloquence, he prescribed a cure for the sickness that he saw. "My favorite poet," he told them, "is Aeschylus. And he once wrote 'And even in our sleep pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us all by the awful grace of God.' What we need in the United States, he said, is not division ... is not hatred ... is not violence and lawlessness, but is love and wisdom and compassion toward one another and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer in our country, whether they be white or whether they be black."

Christians and other Americans have engaged in this hard work before. Slavery was ended. Jim Crow was dismantled. Civil rights were expanded. Our work need not be futile. We can live into our better days our forebears only dreamed about.

**Finally, we lift up those stories that reveal light over darkness, hope over despair, and even life over death.** Let me close with a few:

Sunday night Patti and I were guests of Nadeem and Seema Zafar in their lovely home in Germantown. This isn't the big Iftar dinner you've heard me talk about. This was a family, their son is at MUS, opening their home to Muslim and non-Muslim friends to celebrate the end of the Ramadan fast. Before we ate the splendid spread they kneeled down on their prayer rugs and prayed, while we prayed silently. Then Nadeem expressed great appreciation for his friends who were there, hoping that God would be pleased by our presence. I told Nadeem that I wish 200 million Americans could be there and witness what we witnessed. "That would be nice," he said, "but I don't think we could feed them all."

Thursday night Rebekah shared with me an experience she had here at More than a meal. She sent a text: Took Sam with me to MTAM worship and dinner. He was lackluster in his enthusiasm to say the least. Got him to dinner saying we would just stay a little while. And then Chad Braddock swooped in and had him following him around serving drinks and desserts for the rest of the night. Didn't see him until the end of the evening when he came over to ask if we could come back sometime (and if he could have an ice cream sandwich.) On a day that I was trying to figure out how to respond to two more horrific killings of black men, I was able to bring my child to serve a room full of people in need of a meal. He noted on the way home that there were a lot of brown people there. And we got to talk about what racism is and how it is our job to be people who speak up. So grateful.

You see, Sam is already so far ahead of where many of us were when we became adults. All because of faithful parents and a faithful church who would not just pass on by.

Speaking of a faithful church, you need to know what some of your fellow parishioners were up to on Friday evening. It turns out that there is a support group for Memphis Area Gay and Lesbian youth. And it turns out that many of these have been disowned by their own families, kicked out of their homes, and abandoned by their churches. And it turns out that they had not even been able to attend their own proms. They decided to have their own prom. So a few people in your midst...Lola McCrarey, Clare Stallings, A.J. Northrup, Matt Matthews had listened, really listened to those in the ditch, and decided not to pass by. They came up with the most beautiful smorgasbord of food ... all kinds ... for the kids to enjoy; but more importantly letting them know that they are valued as children of God.

Finally, on Friday we had two memorial services here. One was for Rick Johnson who, though not officially a member, was a tenor in our choir. He had been in the hospital for a while, and at one time it appeared he might be able to go home. "I'm going to join the church," he said. Well,

he wasn't able to make it home, but he did join the church triumphant, surrounded by a chorus of heavenly angels.

The other service was for 85 year old Anne Brown. Baptized here in 1931. Loved this church dearly, its history, its traditions. But even more, always, always wanting the church to move forward, to become even more compassionate to all of God's children, especially those on the side of the road. Now, at both services we proclaimed the truth that in life and in death, we belong to God. And that means that despair, defeat, disillusionment and even death are not dead ends, but signs of an impending resurrection. Only as we have the faith to live fully in the midst of that sometimes painful contradiction will we too find resurrection, the transformation of our lives, and the renewal of our nation as we share the inheritance of the abundant eternal life.

It begins with the heart, but it cannot, dare not, end there. Go and do likewise.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Jill Duffield, *Presbyterian Outlook*, July 4, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. I am obviously indebted to Jill Duffield, the editor of *Presbyterian Outlook*, for her comments on this passage.