

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 7/15/07
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Text: Luke 10:25-37

Just out of seminary, I was hired as an assistant priest at a large church on the other side of the county. We had a weekly staff meeting on Mondays that started with lunch together at 12:30. So at about 11:45 every Monday morning, a buzz would begin among the various offices about what we wanted to eat for lunch, where we'd order it, and who would pick it up.

What we wanted to order, and from where, was ultimately determined by which female staff member was on which diet at the beginning of any given week. We rotated through Weight Watchers, Slim Fast, Atkins, South Beach, and countless others several times. And each Monday, as we discussed who couldn't eat what and why, our building manager would invariably roll his eyes and say, with exasperation, "Why do you all insist on making this so complicated when it's very simple? To lose weight, you have to eat less and exercise more. That's all there is to it." Cris practiced what he preached. He didn't have a weight problem. He hauled stuff all over the building all day long, and he usually ate just one meal a day. Even now, years later, when I'm reading, with growing excitement, about the latest fad diet, I'll hear Cris' voice inside my head, gently chiding me for trying, yet again, to circumvent that basic truth: eat less, exercise more.

In today's passage from the Gospel of Luke, we hear a simple answer given to a very important question. In a society in which there was no distinction between religious law and civil law, a legal expert asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Luke indicates that this lawyer asks the question to test Jesus. But regardless of his motive, we eagerly await Jesus' reply, because it's a hot topic for all of us. How can we be assured that we're in a right relationship with God, in this life and in the life to come? How can we be certain that we're part of God's kingdom?

Jesus tells the lawyer that he already knows the answer to the question he's posing. This man is already completely familiar with God's law. So what does it say? The lawyer answers, correctly, from Deuteronomy and Leviticus: "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 your neighbor as yourself." "But," the lawyer then counters, "Exactly who is my neighbor?"

If this interchange weren't about the most important issue of all time, it would be funny. This learned man has accurately identified that which is required for a vibrant, ongoing relationship with God: giving all of oneself to God – heart, soul, strength, mind – holding nothing back, and giving all of oneself in that same way to others. All. Everything. Everyone. The lawyer's immediate response is, "What's the exception? To which neighbor does this not apply? Where's the loophole? What's the limit of my responsibility?"

Do you see why this story reminds me of staff lunch at my former church? We desperately want to lose weight, or so we claim. But we already know what we have to do - eat less and exercise more. Every day. Long term. All the time. "But," we want to know, "what's the exception?"

What combination of foods will let us get around that? What's the least we have to do? What gimmick will make us thin while we eat what we want?"

Just as there isn't a way around the basics of losing weight, there isn't a way around the basics of abundant life with God. Jesus illustrates that with what has come to be known as the story of the Good Samaritan.

An unidentified man traveling on a road that's known to be dangerous is robbed, beaten, and left to die. Two other men come along – a priest and a Levite – who see this bloody mess at the side of the road but have very good reasons for not stopping to help. For one, they're both subject to specific religious laws about purity. Those laws would make it impossible for them to carry out their vocational tasks – the acts of holiness of their faith community - if they become unclean by dealing with a corpse. As well, these men are street-wise. It wasn't unusual for robbers to use an injured or dead person as bait, so that when someone stopped to help, they themselves could then be attacked and robbed.

A third traveler shows mercy. The Samaritan – a member of a race of people marginalized and despised by the priest and the Levite – probably had a little less to lose by stopping to help the man who had been attacked. As an outcast himself, the Samaritan wouldn't have had to be concerned with issues of ritual purity. But he did put his own safety on the line, and he willingly gave away two days' pay in order to help his neighbor – a man whom he'd never laid eyes on before and might never see again. The Samaritan showed mercy, Jesus tells the lawyer, and what he did is the essence of the experience of God's kingdom. Reaching out in compassion to one who suffers is an act of holiness.

We're not told of the lawyer's response to what Jesus had to say. He might have replied, "That kind of behavior is just too hard and requires too much." To which Jesus would have simply smiled and said, "Watch me." This encounter, between Jesus and the expert in the law, takes place in Luke's Gospel as Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to give all of himself, holding nothing back, in confrontation with the political and economic systems of the privileged and the powerful. Jesus' response to suffering was compassion, which superseded his reputation, his comfort, and his safety. His life and death were the ultimate example of what a life full of God looks like. And Jesus calls his followers to do the same.

How do we do that? How do we, ordinary people trying to make our way in the world, live lives of compassion and mercy? Not through sheer willpower and gritted teeth, but by God's grace and our intentional openness and response to God. Studying Jesus' life, we learn about, and can choose to imitate, specific examples of how to love God by being with, and for, another. We affirm that the presence and power of the risen Christ is with and for us in every moment, in every circumstance. We can choose to be open to the reality of that presence and power. We can choose to expect it.

The kingdom of God becomes a reality in our lives when we show mercy – investing our interest, our attention, our energy, and our resources as fully in the welfare of our neighbors as in our own needs and wants. Our neighbor is anyone who needs help that we have the ability and the

resources to provide. It's hard work and involves hard choices. And all too often, we choose what's easier.

What is a vital, engaged life with God worth to us? Is experiencing a growing and deepening relationship with God as important to us as is establishing and maintaining our reputation, our career goals, our personal safety? Is relationship with God worth as much to us as building and protecting our own resources?

We don't make the choice just once – we have to make it over and over again. Day by day, sometimes even moment by moment, we come to forks in the road of our life where we have the opportunity to choose between self-interest and self-protection, and compassion and self-sacrifice. May we, through God's grace, love, and power, choose compassion, which is an act of holiness. In that choice, we will find the fullness and the richness of life that is God's intention for us. Amen.