

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Word of God,  
Jesus Christ, Our Lord, amen.

Over the years, PJ and I have taken vacations to some of our Country's  
largest cities. We've been to New York City, Chicago, Washington DC and others  
over the years. I'll never forget the view from our high-rise Hotel in New York.  
As I looked out our window straining to see the beautiful skyline of the city, I



looked downward only to see this man. (SLIDE) I presumed him to  
be homeless, laying on the sidewalk every day we were there. Was that man my  
neighbor? (SLIDE) When you go to a Reds Baseball game in Cincinnati the  
panhandlers line the streets. Some even have handmade signs stating the obvious,  
“I just want beer money”. Are they my neighbors? We've all seen the orphans on  
our TV screens begging for our money. Are they our neighbors? What about that  
rundown house in Greenville that has those banners hanging from the front porch  
and the front yard full of junk. You can even hear the raucous noises coming from  
inside as you're handing out food at the Soup Kitchen... Are they our neighbors?

“And who is my neighbor?”, the expert in the law asked. Jesus responded  
by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. You all know it well, yet so many  
times we miss the point Jesus wants to make. Many imagine Jesus told it to show

us how to be good, Christian people or they think that if we try to live up to the example of the Good Samaritan, then we're on our way to heaven. How contrary to the Gospel that is! Jesus isn't speaking these words to show the law expert how to be a good person. He already knows that. Jesus has a very different purpose in mind. He accomplishes this purpose in our hearts today as we rightly listen to his words and ask ourselves: Have I loved my neighbor as myself?

The first thing Jesus wants us to understand is we are unable to justify ourselves under the law. That was one of Jesus's aims as he spoke to this law expert. Consider the situation--the law expert wants to test Jesus. Does he have some new laws to add to what God gave Moses at Mt. Sinai, some new life hack to gain eternal life? "What must I do to inherit eternal life?", he asks. Now if anyone insists on focusing on what they themselves must do, then Jesus has nothing new. God has already revealed through Moses what must be done. So, Jesus directs the expert to the Old Testament law. Our expert lawyer gives us an excellent summary of the law. "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, Love your neighbor as yourself". Jesus answers, "Do this and you will live". How true that is! If you keep the law perfectly all the time loving God above all and loving your neighbor as yourself, God promises you eternal life -- as long as you never fail, not even once. If we could do that, then Jesus didn't need to come. If we

could keep the law, then it was foolish for Jesus to suffer as he did. Those brief words from Jesus, “Do this and you will live”, must have tweaked the man’s beak. “Have I really kept the law? Have I loved my neighbor as myself?” Guilt started to accuse him. He needed to justify himself. He needed to prove that he really had kept the law. It all depended on what that one not so little word, neighbor, meant. So, he asks, “And who is my neighbor?”

When you hear Jesus describe what it means to be a neighbor, ask yourself, “Have I loved my neighbor as myself?” A Jewish man falls to robbers and is left half dead. Two Jewish religious leaders pass by on the other side, but then the Samaritan comes. Samaritans and Jews hated each other, but that doesn’t stop him from acting. He puts aside all his bias and Samaritan privilege as his heart goes out to this stranger. According to Jesus, to love your neighbor as yourself means not only your friends, but also your enemies because they both are our neighbors. Think of what that means in our day-to-day lives. When something bad happens to that annoying coworker or that person who insults you or that classmate that calls you names or that individual who hurt you... Do you find yourself even for a short moment, relishing the passing pleasure of them getting what they deserve?

I regularly visit the ELCA Clergy FaceBook Group for many reasons. I like to see what other Pastors do when presented with common questions or problems. I’ve visited that page often over the past year trying to see how other Churches

were dealing with the pandemic. This week I was appalled with the hatred that flowed against Mr. Limbaugh on this and many other FaceBook pages. No matter if you agreed with his politics or not, was he our neighbor? Does his family deserve our sympathy as our neighbor? So, have you loved your neighbor as yourself? In case you're thinking Jesus can't really be including our enemies with our neighbors, remember what he said back in Luke 6, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you".

Have you loved your neighbor, yes, even your enemy, as yourself? Has anyone done that? Not the law expert, not you, not me. Jesus did! He loved even his betrayer, serving him Holy Communion at the Last Supper just before the betrayal. Jesus prayed for those who nailed him to the cross, "Father, forgive them." Jesus came into this dark, sin-infested world to seek and to save his enemies, lost sinners, including you and me. Only Jesus has perfectly loved even his enemies, giving up his very self for them, for you and for me.

We have more to learn from Jesus' parable. Many imagine they have loved their neighbor as they point to their works of charity. It's often easy to justify ourselves in the eyes of humanity by pointing out how much more we're doing than others might be doing. At least we're not like the priest or the Levite who passed by on the other side, doing nothing. Especially living in a rich country as

we do, it's easy to give from the overflow of our surplus or figure we're doing our share through the taxes we pay for government programs. But is this loving our neighbor as ourselves? Look at the Samaritan. He didn't figure, "If those religious leaders didn't help at all as long as I help just a little bit, I'm doing better than they are." He didn't think, "I'm tired from my journey. I need to ride my donkey." He didn't think, "This is a dangerous place. I'll just report it to the authorities in the next town. Hopefully he won't die in the meantime." Instead, he reasoned, "If I were lying there half dead, I would want someone to dress my wounds and carry me to safety right away." He loved his neighbor as himself. He was willing to make the sacrifice. He used his own wine and oil to dress the wound at his expense. He gave up his comfort so that the donkey could carry the wounded man. He sacrificed his time caring for him. Yes, he even risked his life lingering in that dangerous place to help, before it was too late. He knew God's Law and he lived it. Do we really love our neighbor as ourselves, not rating our efforts against others who have done less, but rather ready to sacrifice whatever is necessary to bring the needed help? I won't point my finger at you because I already know I have failed! Only Jesus gave up all in order to bring the help we so desperately needed. He left the riches of heaven and became poor for our sake, lowering himself even to death on a cross so that we may become rich through his poverty. Only Jesus loved his neighbor as himself, giving up himself for you and for me.

I know how badly I've failed to give tireless love, but Jesus never failed.

The Samaritan didn't just dump the man off at the inn. He took care of him throughout the night and paid for additional care. He promised to pick up the tab for whatever more charges there might be. How easily our hearts grow cold and jaded over time when we're helping our neighbors, especially when they seem to need our help over and over again... Our patience wears out. We so easily tire of loving our neighbor as ourselves! Not so with Jesus. He loved us to the very end. Through the mocking and insults, through the beatings and even through the darkness of his god-forsaken cry, he never grew tired of loving you.

Then Jesus closes his lesson, "Go and do likewise". The problem is that I can't! I know I don't love my enemies as I should. My selfishness holds back how much I'm willing to sacrifice for others. I so easily tire even of loving my friends sometimes, let alone my enemies! And that, dear friends, is why Jesus came: To pay for our lovelessness. To atone for our failures. To credit us with his perfect love that never tires, but gives its all even for his enemies. That is why Jesus told this parable. He didn't tell it to show us how to be good people, but to show the expert in the law and to show you and me, how badly we have failed to be good people. How much we need Jesus! Our love toward others cannot and will not save us, because our love fails.

O God, thank you for your agape love that never fails and never tires. Break us of our habit of thinking we are good enough. Strengthen us with your love so we can love all our neighbors as we love ourselves. Amen.