

The gospel reading for this morning gets right to the heart of Christian moral theology and gives an unequivocal standard by which to guide our lives if we want to live a life that is right with God. Of surprise to some churchgoers, even though Luke quotes Jesus to give us the enjoinder, the message really predates Jesus. It has its origin in the *Shema Israel*, “Hear O Israel, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and might.” Jesus added to this by including something that he had picked up from Mark’s earlier gospel, which when combined with the *Shema* is what we call Jesus’ “Summary of the Law.” When asked by some Pharisees what was the greatest of the Jewish Law, Jesus quoted the *Shema*, but added another to it. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” As Mark told us, in the mind of Jesus nothing was more important or carried higher moral authority than these two commandments – love God and love your neighbor.

I once knew a woman, very wealthy and very generous, who as she aged became increasingly concerned about her eternal life and the more she grew concerned the more generous she became, but her generosity was not universal and she struggled mightily with the idea God expected her to love her neighbors, universally and unequivocally. She told me repeatedly that she had no trouble being generous to those in need, as long as they were good people, but that some of her neighbors, especially the one that lived next door to her were not good people. She was far more concerned with seeing those that failed to rise to her expectations of sound moral behavior punished, and she assumed that God thought the same way. Luke tells us, in the gospel reading today, that God does not think this way. In fact, if we take Luke at face value, Jesus was adamant that the only road to salvation was the road of love for God *and* love for neighbor. When the lawyer in today’s story answered Jesus with the correct answer of how to achieve eternal life – love God and love your neighbor, Jesus responded. “So, you have given the right answer. Do this and you will live.”

Our problem with this enjoinder is exactly that of the wealthy woman I knew, who was very generous to me, as her pastor, but not so generous to those of whom she felt morally superior. It is human nature to be willing to give generously of one’s time, talent and treasure to those who are “worth it.” It is hard for anyone to give to those we judge “not worth it.” What we need to remember is that God has not appointed us judge. In Luke’s story, Jesus told the lawyer a story that the lawyer needed to really take to heart. A man fell upon misfortune and was wounded and in great need. The perception of those who should have known better, a priest and a Levite, was that the man, for whatever reason, was not worth their effort. They simply ignored him. But the clincher in this story was that the “good neighbor,” the one who rose to the divine expectation of neighborly love, was a Samaritan, giving us, by the way, the title of “Good Samaritan” applied to

generous people who do loving things for others simply out of the goodness of their heart. What you may not realize is that to our Lord's people, Samaritans were considered nothing but foreign trash. They were not held in high esteem. In short what Jesus told this lawyer was only one in the story that rose to God's expectations was the one least expected, the one that the Jews of Jesus' day would never consider as having favor in God's eyes.

If we want God's favor, we find it when we come to the realization that in God's eyes we are all created equal. We are all his children, loved unconditionally because of that simple reason. God created us and declared us to be good. He expects that we will love one another as he loves us, and our failure to do so is nothing short of our own rejection of God's love for us. Is it hard to love someone that offends us? Of course, but that is the challenge given us at baptism – to love all others as he loves us. *Amen.*