

July 11, 2010
Colossians 1:1-14
Luke 10:25-37

What must I do?

What must I do? It's the question we are always asking. To get things done, to get things accomplished. What must I do? To tie up the loose ends and take care of my responsibilities. What must I do? It's the question that keeps us up at night worrying. It's the reason we have the internet, so we can ask at 2 in the morning. What must I do? What must I do to pay off my debts? What must I do to find a plumber? What must I do to patch that crack in the driveway? What must I do to get the kids to eat their vegetables? To lose 20 pounds? To increase my gas mileage? To improve my backhand? To find inner happiness? What must I do? It's a question we ask a lot. Even when it comes to God and eternal life. What must I do? What must I do to get it right and get salvation and get into heaven? What must I do for you, God? What must I do? It's a question we tend to come to God with a lot. Just like the lawyer in today's story. And it's a question we try to answer in the church. And we try to answer it as simply as Jesus. Love God, love your neighbor. That's what we must do for eternal life. It seems easy. But trying to do

it, isn't always easy. We get the big idea of it, but we don't always practically and specifically what we must do. How do we do it? When do we do it? What must we do to love God and love our neighbors? What must we do?

This past week our General Assembly had its biannual meeting and it was full of trying to decide what we as a church must do. Now Presbyterians like to talk about what we must do, we seem to enjoy defining precisely what it is. Our Book of Order that has the rules for worship and government and discipline, it keeps growing and growing because we keep trying to explain what we must do. We clarify everything that members and sessions and presbyteries and ministers and elders and deacons must do to be the church. And we keep trying to be more and more specific. And we debate the words and reword them and expand them because we want to be clear. We want to spell it all out so everyone will know what to do.

But we aren't the only church that wants to do that. Presbyterians aren't particularly crazy. We are just human like everyone else who want answers. We want to know what we must do. We want clear rules to

follow. And want the Bible to give them to us plainly. We want Jesus to give them to us plainly. A checklist that we fill out would be nice. An inventory for heaven-required behavior. “OK, it says here no lying or cheating or killing or working on the Sabbath. No fornication, or idolatry, or sorcery, or jealousy, or anger, or envy, or drunkenness.” Got it. Alright. Check, check, check. Except that’s not the whole list. You’ve forgotten some rules for eternal life over here, some would say. No playing cards or dancing or gambling or women wearing long pants or men with long hair. And hey, hey, hey says another group. Don’t you think you are forgetting something? If you really want eternal life, then this is what you have to do; you have to say the bible is inerrant, and that men have authority over women, and the literal Genesis creation story means no evolution. And you aren’t doing anything for your salvation unless you follow we do about birth control and abortion and homosexuality and the posting of the Ten Commandments and the paving of the church parking lot and regulations for church security. What must I do to have eternal life? There are lots of people who will tell you. And lots of us still wrestling with what exactly it is that we

must do. We are still struggling with the list of what it takes. The qualifications that justify us and say hey, I'm living right. Every day we think about it and worry about how we are doing. Because if we just follow the right list, if we check off the right number of things then it'll all be OK. If we do it right, we get the reward. Just like the world says. If we do well in school, then we'll get a good job. Put in the hard work, we'll get a promotion. Live in that kind of neighborhood. Have those kind of friends. Be that kind of parent. Make your car payments on time. Eat a balanced diet. Get some exercise. Buy the right investments. Provide for your family. And life will be good. It will be great. Because of what you do. It's the gospel of prosperity. The gospel of getting what I've earned. The gospel of saving ourselves by our own actions. It makes sense. It seems fair. Do this and you get that. And we come to Jesus because we just want to know. Like the lawyer who comes to Jesus today, we want to know, What must I do? Now there is a part of each of us that is just like the lawyer. A part that wants things defined and spelled out. That doesn't just want general statements like love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Because what does that mean? What

does that mean for ME? It's sort of vague and way too open to interpretation. Could you give me some more definition on that Jesus? Who exactly is my neighbor? And how will I know when I've checked it off the list?

As Frederick Buechner writes, that lawyer part of ourselves hopes Jesus will answer by saying, "OK, glad you asked: A neighbor (hereafter referred to as the party of the first part) shall be defined as meaning a person of your own background and heritage whose legal residence is within a radius of no more than three miles of one's legal residence, unless there is another person of similar culture and background (hereafter referred to as the party of the second part) who lives closer to the party of the first part than oneself, in which case the party of the second part is to be construed as the neighbor to the party of the first part and oneself is then relieved of all responsibility to the matters hereunto pertaining."

How much easier would that make things? How much simpler would life be if the rules for heaven were that clear? And we didn't have to think so much about what to do? But Jesus doesn't want us to stop

thinking. He doesn't let the lawyer or any of us off the hook. He gives us no lists and no loopholes. Because the grace of God does not look like a set of rules. It looks like a cross and an empty grave. It looks like mercy given for no good reason. It looks like this: Imagine a nameless guy, robbed and beaten and left to die. And the people that you'd think would stop to help, the priest and the Levite, they don't stop. Instead a Samaritan, a blaspheming sinner, a heretic of the kind that all good people of God hated. An unbeliever. He stops. He has mercy. Though no one would have been required to do the same for him.

Who is the one who loves his neighbor? It's clear. It's the Samaritan. And Jesus is saying we must do like the Samaritan does. We must be like the Samaritan. Not the priest, who walks away because he has a very important meeting. Not the Levite, who hurries on because he just doesn't feel qualified to assist in situations like this. For anyone from the race and culture of any of Jesus' audience. Someone who is not a Jew or an Israelite or one of the people of God, not a neighbor in any sense of the word. A Samaritan, who can't even speak the language right. Who probably came from stealing a TV like those people do, or driving drunk

without a license or selling drugs or eating dogs with their rice or cramming together in dirty apartments. A Samaritan is the one who has compassion on this stranger who probably would have spit on him on an ordinary day. A Samaritan loves a Jewish man as his neighbor. Because real mercy doesn't have a list of who you can and cannot help. Real mercy does not make the rules any simpler. Real mercy has us loving that other person as we would love ourselves.

Now it would be easy to hear in this story a morality tale of what we must do. That for eternal life we must stop to pick up hitchhikers and stranded motorists. That we must face the bandits and murderers and stop on a dangerous highways where trucks are flying past you at 80 MPH. Merciful roadside assistance is what Jesus wants from us. And we must update that checklist that we fret over. But I think Jesus is inviting us to look at things differently. Faith is not a series of tests to qualify for heaven. It's not about performing the right tasks. It's not about what we do and our rewards and our salvation. It's about something more. It's about mercy. It's about the love of God that goes way beyond rules. That

doesn't stop at what has to be done, but goes all the way to what needs to be done for mercy's sake.

What if this isn't about what we need to do? If we don't read the story and see ourselves as the Priest or the Levite or the Samaritan? What if we see ourselves as the one lying beaten at the side of the road? What if that's who we are supposed to identify with? The one robbed, stripped of what she has, knocked senseless, bruised and broken, lying there half dead. What if that is us? And what if it's us that needs the mercy? And what if our neighbors aren't who we expected? And what if we are surprised by just how surprising God's mercy is?

I think that is what Jesus is asking to see. That is what Jesus is asking us to do in our lives. To love one another with mercy because we can see ourselves in them. Regardless of what they look like, sound like, or smell like. Regardless of how godless we think they are. We are asked to respond to their suffering as if it is our own. Because it has been us at the side of the road, who received mercy we didn't expect. Who have been helped by someone who shouldn't have cared. Who have been pulled out of a pit by a God who saw us as one of God's own. Not

because it was on some list somewhere but because of God's amazing love and mercy.

What must we do? What must we do to inherit eternal life? It's more than just getting all those i's dotted and t's crossed. It's more than making it through that list to get into heaven. Jesus says, we must have mercy. And learn to see ourselves with the people at the side of the road. The bruised and battered, and abused and neglected, the people of Darfur, and Haiti and Pakistan and Indonesia and Lexington and Midway. The disabled, and handicapped, and the ex-con, and the homeless and the sick and the slow. What if they are us? And what if that mercy and compassion is the same mercy and compassion that we need too? And if we can just share it with one person that God has put in our path. The next person on our way, at the office, at Kroger, at the game. Each of us can go and do likewise. And the eternal life of God will live in us. Right now.