

## DON'T LOSE THIS KEY

Text on Sunday, July 10, 2010

*Luke 10: 25-42*

Luke tells this story so differently from Mark. Mark has it that Jesus picks just these two commandments from among hundreds and calls them great, to which the lawyer rejoins, "You are right, so right!" Luke turns it around. The lawyer wants to learn something about the rule of life, but rather than tell him, Jesus questions the lawyer. *How do you read the law? What do you see?* The lawyer names the two loves as the true law, and Jesus is the one who says, "You are right, so right! Do this and live."

But Luke's lawyer is not happy. He wants to justify himself, the story says—to defend himself. We get it. We get to see it on the news every week. A public figure is asked a question about some questionable doings, and he never, never, never says *You're right, I screwed up*. No, he wants to justify himself. Just as you and I have often done when our honey or our boss calls us up short. "I am not . . . I do not . . . It's complicated."

Our lawyer says he wants to know the way to eternal life. Why not accept Jesus' answer and leave, rejoicing with reverence for this word and the Teacher? Instead, he is defensive. He asks, *Who is my neighbor?* as if no meaningful answer can possibly be given. What is troubling him? Why doesn't Jesus' counsel comfort and renew him?

I'm sure you've seen this, or been this, where not an earthly thing is missing from a life—enough money, a good home, decent work, okay health, a caring partner, a good name, even a church home perhaps—but that soul craves more, and more, and is not happy. When one of us is in that state, we are vulnerable to abuse ourselves with one potion or another, for the hunger loose in us is endless. Nothing can fill it. That is why we can stuff in so much of whatever poison we choose: television, shopping, smoke, work, drink.

Jesus offers the lawyer wisdom—*Do this and you will live*—but he turns it aside. He has performed these duties. He has gone to church, he has prayed, he has ladled soup for the homeless and donated to charities, but his appetite for a happiness unknown grips his mind like a wolf's jaw. You may have observed something like it in a marriage in trouble. One partner is tumbling from the relationship like a hiker falling off a path, and the therapist suggests a course of action, things to do to get a footing again. *Do this and you will live*, says the counselor. But the counsel only more disheartens the tumbling wanderer, for he cannot *feel* his way into the practices, and so will not perform them. To perform them, in the manner of a student listening to his master, requires a shift of control. If he would for even seven seconds cease listening to his inner anguish and the fantasy of happiness it preserves, he could come to himself, and to her. This he will not do. That dream he will not relinquish. This is where our lawyer is, stuck between a desire for more satisfaction than he has known and duties he knows but for which he has no feeling. He wants to save his life, but he is not willing to lose it. He must have it on his own terms. A doubled mind is a troubled mind.

So Jesus tells to him our famous parable of two men for whom the performance of duty squeezes out all compassion; and of another, a stranger in that land who has no duties there, or prestige or advantage or future, yet in whom mercy rules. He is the neighbor, Jesus affirms. She is *my neighbor*, whom I shall love as myself—the one in me from whom reckoning and positioning and social duty have dropped away like scales; the one in me "who has renounced every selfish attachment and draws abiding joy and strength from the One within / who lives not for herself but lives to serve the Lord of Love in all;" the one whose sense for what to do arises and rises to heaven through the given situation. She is your neighbor—your Nachbar—the one who lives very near to you, whom you shall love as your own true self.

Did you hear the story that way? Or did you hear the tale of the good Samaritan the same old way: that all people are your neighbors, that all who are beaten by injustice need your compassion; and that outsiders are better at seeing who is in need than insiders are? It's a good point, but it wasn't Jesus' point. As if expecting you to tumble down that slope into ordinary duty and guilty self-critique, Luke now rolls another ball at you to keep your heart dancing. He tells the story of Martha and Mary.

If you have gone often to church, you have heard each of these stories often, but always separately. That "common lectionary" we rarely consult offers the story of the good Samaritan for today, and stops when Jesus tells the lawyer "Go and do likewise." But Luke didn't compose his gospel to fit comfortably short readings into short sermons. He wrote for life and he did not forget the question at the head of the story, how to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and strength *and* to love your neighbor as yourself.

These two commands are really, really one. I do not mean interchangeable, so that if you are doing good works, then that's loving God, so don't sweat the God stuff. And I do not mean that if you are devoted to God and God's promises to you, then don't fret about works of mercy. I mean—Jesus means, Luke means, all the law and the prophets mean—these two are one. Where love of God is missing, duty and service of every kind are empty. When desire to know your true self falls away—yes, that One true whom Teresa names—neither God nor any "other" has dimension. When the other's need touches you not, God and self are but puppets in your closet.

Has a breakdown like this come upon you at some time? Of course it has. That is why Luke reworked Mark's story of the two great commandments—to help us who have ears to hear come free of our guilt over duties unmet and unfelt, to come, as we said once many moons ago, to attend not to the duty of our presence but to the beauty of our presence before our God.

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of one thing only. Mary has chosen the better part." Mary sitting listening to one thing only has set her feet on the path of life. Don't lose this key. When you have come apart; when God and you have come apart; when that weeping world of need seems to be tearing you apart, return to one thing only; come home and do soul service—before social service. There is an order of supply here, a hierarchy of heaven over earth. It is the reason in Sabbath rest. It is the center point in prayer and meditation. It is the test of truth in every action that is just—that you acknowledge yourself a creature who cannot account for his store of energy or her treasury of gifts. We are, wrote Emerson, "a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence." Stop, like Mary. Stop from the kitchen duties, also stop from the works of mercy and advocacy and the clarion call for justice. Stop, fall silent and listen. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart."

If part of you says, "I've done that but it did not renew my feeling; I am still hungry," what you have is a little diagnosis, not of your true self, but of your practices. The things you did were not deep enough, not still enough, not stop enough to get you wholly alone with one thing only, like Mary, who has chosen the better part. It cannot be taken from you, but you can lose it. Do not lose this key. Nourish your soul, else you cannot offer to others what they really need. Soul service before social service. Stop before you go.

How do you stop to be with the Master? How did Mary? Of course no one knows. But we can say this. Jesus cannot have been talking all the while. People don't learn well from much talking. We say Jesus was a great teacher. Well, the only proof of great teaching is great learning in what the teacher intends. What did Jesus intend? That you learn to lose your life for his sake. To this end, he cannot always have been talking, but listening, questioning, learning too, showing by example, not by many words, what it is to lay down your life that you may receive life that has no end but God. Now it is full summer. Stop before your God before you go.