

Luke 10:25-37      8th Sunday after Pentecost      July 30, 1995

If I were going to find an actor to act his part, I think I would choose Tom Cruise. Handsome. Full of confidence. Arrogant. He must have been like that. A lawyer our translation calls him. A scribe the older translations said. He was part of the ruling class, a man expert in God's law. He stood up to put Jesus to the test. "Teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Now since this lawyer already knew all the answers, Jesus let him answer his own question. What is written in the law, what do you read there?

"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." He has given the answer so many times before, he knows it by heart.

You have given the right answer, said Jesus, do this and you shall live.

But now the arrogance shows up, as he asks, "And who is my neighbor?"

Whom can I not love? That is the real question here. Whom can I treat as if they are of no concern to me? Drunks? Serbs? Arabs? Jews? Women? Men? The very old? Teenagers?

This is the trap for Jesus - can't you just see the sparkle in Tom Cruise's eye as he springs it? He has Jesus right where he wants him?

It is like turning on talk radio and learning who is no longer a neighbor today - feminists, welfare receivers, bureaucrats, lobbyists, rich industrialists, farmers.

Or like being part of our conversations as we push drug dealers and unwed mothers and teenagers who vandalize outside the circle of our love.

No matter how Jesus answers the argument will only be just begun. The debate can go on forever.

But Jesus told a story, a story about a beaten and robbed man. A priest and a Levite walked by. A Samaritan helped.

Do the same, said Jesus.

Who is my neighbor? Anyone who needs your help. Stop debating and start doing. Loving. Helping.

And that is the last we see of this lawyer who might be played by Tom Cruise.

Now what do we do with Jesus story? We tell it to children. Sunday School and Bible School are the places we tell of the good Samaritan. And tell our children to love like that.

Once we get to be adults, many of us use the story to make ourselves feel guilty from time to time. We have walked by on the other side. The story abuses our peace of mind.

So I sat down with the task of preaching this story to you once more. And I came up with Robert Redford.

In my mind that is the kind of guy who plays the part of the Samaritan. He has money, an animal on which he places the beaten man. He is compassionate; he pays for the man's care. He even promises to return to pay whatever more is needed.

But the truth is, Robert Redford will not work in this role. Samaritans were despised. Scum. Filth. Peasants. This is no proud and noble man who comes along. But a nobody. He was a

Samaritan. Jews avoided them, went miles out of their way to avoid Samaritans. Like we might go out of our way to avoid an area where black people live.

On one level the story of the Samaritan who helps is about loving and doing good.

But on another level it is about the one Isaiah foretold:

He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

This is the sort of man who takes the man out of the ditch - rescues him from death.

Despised, rejected, one we would not like to look at.

A Samaritan. Jesus.

He is the one despised, rejected, who provides for our care, who will come again. Jesus.

The story is an invitation to love, but even more an invitation to recognize that the Samaritan comes to lift us out of our sin, out of our need, out of our death and into his life.

He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

The very one we wanted to avoid, has not avoided us. He offers himself to us for our healing. And sends us into the world to love.