13th Sunday after Trinity
Rolling Meadows - 1965

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IN NOMINE JESU

St. Luke 10: 29 Who is my neighbor?

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

Arguing about religion is a popular pastime - on college campuses, durin coffee breaks at the office, or at home when friends get together for a pleasant evening. The argument can range from the existence of God in the space age to minute questions like the classic one of the middle ages: How many angels can danc on the head of a needle? Interesting as they may be, arguments about religion seldom get anywhere. Arguing about the pros and cons of the Christian faith often becomes an academic substitute for the real thing - an exercise of the mind rather than a personal commitment of the kind that is demanded by what the Bible calls faith. It helps a man to avoid becoming mixed up with Jesus Christ in a personal way. To argue about faith easily furnishes a wonderful intellectual alibi for unbelief - for keeping Jesus at arms length. So it happened in today's Gospel. Jesus had just asserted His divine Sonship, stating that No one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him, when one of these arguers got up and put Him to the test. With sharp challenge in his voice, he asked, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?

There can be no doubt that the question was well chosen. It deals with the very meaning and goal of our life. From time immemorial philosophers have racked their brains over this question. So this Jesus will not be the first to think He has something final to say about God and eternal life. But our Lord would not be trapped by this argumentative question. Instead, He replied with a question of His own? What is written in the law? How do you read? With some embarrassment the lawyer answered with a well-known and classic summary of the law You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself. Christ cracked the argument - This do, & you will live!

~~As he was reciting this Bible verse he may well have had a strange experience. He knew this passage backwards and forwards, at least as well as you an I knew a few Bible passages. But curiously enough, we may have heard or read or~~

even recited such passages a hundred times - let us say, Faith, hope, love, or The Lord is My Shepherd, or Take no thought for your life - until the time comes when, suddenly, these lifeless words take on new meaning; they begin to come alive. It may happen at the deathbed of a loved one, so that I am compelled to face the question of how we can go on living. All of a sudden this Word of Scripture underwent a strange transformation, giving us solid ground to stand on in the midst of a sea of fear.... So it may have been with this lawyer as he stood before Jesus, reciting this familiar saying about loving God and one's neighbor. How easy it was before to say, God is a God of love. How easily we let such a sentence pass over our lips! It even sounds a bit trite. But let Jesus stand in front of us and look at us - then all of a sudden we hear it spoken by the person we shooed from the door yesterday collecting for the Community Chest; or the begger with the tin cup we passed by on the busy city street; or the neighbor whose name has recently been dragged through the mud. Suddenly we hear them all speaking it, for in them the eyes of the Lord Himself are gazing upon us. So it was the this lawyer when he had recited this passage about this so-called religion of love and Jesus said to him, Do this and you will live, thereby indicating that this was the answer to all his questions.

But the lawyer wanted to engage in a philosophical discussion. He was obviously annoyed when Jesus told him in effect: Don't start by thinking about lov but practice it. Many things can be known only by doing them. To be sure, this is no easy matter. It is easier to discuss a thing than to practice it. Being a Bible scholar, being pious and going to church on Sunday, listening to a sermon on love - this is much easier than to sacrifice my time, effort, and energy to help some poor, helpless creature. It is really very annoying that spiritual things should be so simple, that they should have to do with everyday life, with neighbor friends, beggers, or any insignificant person who happens to come along.

Attempting to justify himself, the lawyer began to pose problems and raise questions. Let's get down to cases: who is my neighbor? The answer to that question came in a short, but compelling story. A man, said Jesus, was going down

from Jerusalem to Jericho. Ah, thinks the lawyer, here we go again. A man, He says. This is no doubt the neighbor whom I asked about - just any person, not a fellow citizen, not a fellow workman, not my wife, not my child - just any person should be my neighbor? Now this is going to be funny, if all men are going to be treated alike and called my neighbors just because they are men.

So there a man lies wounded, Jesus goes on with His story. He has been attacked and he lies there in horrible pain and fever, suffering from dreadful anxiety and nervous shock. He sees someone in clerical dress coming down the road Mortal fear can make a person very sharp-sighted, and like a flash the thought goes through his aching head: Here's a priest who has just come from the temple! He must have heard or even preached a sermon on loving God and one's neighbor. Thank God, here is one who will surely help me.

But in the same moment the priest had seen him too, and he thought to himself: O God, the poor fellow! Lucky it didn't happen to me. Perhaps he even thanked God for it, for he is pious, and God has graciously preserved him from robbers and all catastrophes. But, thinks the priest, interrupting his pious reflections, this surely doesn't mean that I have to help this poor fellow now! The same robbers may still be lying in wait a hundred yards away, just waiting to knock me on the head too. And yet - his conscience compels him to reflect - it would be cowardly not to help. After all, God has put this poor fellow in my way. Already his hand was reaching for his handkerchief to bind up the man's wounds, when suddenly there occurred to him a saving thought. And the saving thought was this question: Who is my neighbor? This fellow whom I donIt even know? This fellow who may well be a bum or even a drunk who probably ran his head into a tree' My family comes first. If it were only myself, I would sacrifice my life for him. But I must think of my family, my vocation. It would surely not be obedience, but sinful, if I too were to allow these robbers to do me in, Bad enough that one person should be assaulted. Besides, I have all the collection money from the temple in Jerusalem in my pocket. It would be foolhardy of me to allow this money, which belongs to God, to fall into the hands of the robbers. He thought of a

hundred other reasons why this man could not possibly be his neighbor. Reasons always present themselves when we want to get out of something. Even the worst blockhead suddenly becomes as sharp-witted as a mathematics professor when it comes to finding reason for getting out of doing something. The road to hell is paved not merely with good intentions but with good reasons.

So the priest passed by on the other side. This is a sign that his conscience was not pacified after all. He made a wide detour around the poor man in order not to see him. For the sight of him might accuse him and take away all his good reasons. This is why the rich man let poor Lazarus lie at his door. He denied him entrance into his house, not because he was afraid he would catch his lice or his T.B., but because he did not want to see him. None of us really wants to see. For to look at our neighbor's misery is the first step in brotherly love. Therefore at the Last Judgment it is our eyes that will be judged first. When Jesus says to the people at the Last Judgment, It was I whom you met in the naked, the hungry, the imprisoned, and you did not help Me, it is highly characteristic that the accused should reply, Lord, when did we see Thee hungry, or thirsty, or naked, or sick? Do we really get the point? What they are saying is, We did not see Thee. And one day the priest too will say this. He will point out that his footprints will prove that he took a wide detour around the wounded man and therefore he could not possibly have recognized him, could not possibly have recognized the Savior. It is so easy to make the detour and see nothing. It is so easy to slide over the statistics of misery in the newspaper and turn off the radio when appeals are made for help.

The Levite too passed by on the other side. He may well have indulged in similar reflections. Perhaps he had a lecture on brotherly love to deliver that evening in Jericho. He made some very quick calculations: If I help this poor fellow, I'll miss my lecture. Here I would be helping only one person, whereas my lecture on brotherhood may help to establish a whole Good Samaritan Society. Therefore, the arithmetic proves the case. The devil is always a good mathematician. So while he was trying to serve God, he was really dishonoring Him like the priest before him, letting his neighbor stick in his misery.

Is it really necessary for me to describe the moment when the Samaritan came upon the wounded man? Must I describe the compassion with which the Samaritan performed his task? Must I praise his fearlessness as far as the robbers are concerned? Must I point out that his was not merely a momentary compassion, an upsurge of emotion, but that he also made provision for the immediate future of the wounded man, that he made arrangements with the innkeeper and was prepared to take further responsibility for Him? And all this despite the fact that he was a Samaritan, one who was considered an enemy of the Jews? There is really no need to go into all of this; for the point of the parable is that we should identify ourselves with the priest and the Levite and repent - that we should remove the blinders from our eyes and get to work and do something. For the parable closes with the words: Go and do likewise. But we cannot go and do and love, if we stop and ask first, Who is my neighbor? The devil is waiting for us to ask this question; and he will always whisper excuses into our ears. We can love only if we have the mind of Jesus and turn the lawyer's question around. Then we shall ask not Who is my neighbor? but To whom am I a neighbor? Who is laid at my door? Who is expecting help from me? What is more, we must always be prepared to have our plans interrupted. God is always a God of surprises. He is always compelling us to improvise. Unexpectedly - just at the time when we are about to do something else - He confronts us with tasks to perform and sends people across our path.

We cannot close without mentioning the fact that it is Jesus who is telling this parable. We hear the parable from the lips of Him who is the Good Samaritan of us all, who became our neighbor. When we come to die, and the noises of the world are hushed, and we are left in utter loneliness, when even our dear ones must be left behind - then, precisely then, He is our neighbor who will not forsake us; for He faced the robber, Death, and allowed him to strike Him down in order that He might walk with us down this last bitter road. And when we suffer some anxiety or distress or terrible loneliness which nobody understands, when we stand quivering beneath a sense of awful guilt and our friends desert us - here too Jesus is our Neighbor, because He came down from heaven and descended into the

depths of our misery and guilt. Jesus loves us and therefore He finds us. And therefore He also knows us. He knows us better than we know ourselves and still He does not forsake us, still He remains our Friend.. In this happy certainty we go out to do something for Him, to be a neighbor to our poor and needy fellow men, to live for Him who loved us and gave Himself for us.