
Why Does the Christian Cross the Road?

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 10, Year C
at the Church of All Saints by-the-sea, Southport Island, Maine

Last week, I told you that the sending of the seventy was not just a story about evangelism—it was a story about the transformation of the seventy themselves. This week, I want to say something similar: the story of the Good Samaritan is not just about morality; it's about the transformation of the questioning lawyer.

You'll notice a pattern here. I believe the church's primary task is spiritual transformation, and I believe these stories teach us something lasting about God, about ourselves, and about the kind of life we're invited to live today.

So we begin, as we often do, with a question.

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

That's the lawyer's question. And remember, "eternal life" doesn't just mean heaven after death. It means being fully alive now—life in the Spirit, life in the Kingdom of God, a life radiant with love. To "inherit" that life is to step into it now—to let Christ live and pray in and through us. It's allowing God to use us as vessels of grace in the world.

Also remember: a lawyer in Jesus' time was a religious scholar, someone who interpreted the Torah and defined what righteousness meant. So this public question isn't unusual—it's part of the job. He's testing Jesus' understanding of the law.

Jesus responds, as he often does, with a question of his own—not as a debating tactic, but as an invitation. He's inviting the lawyer to consider more deeply what he really wants, and how his current way of thinking might be getting in the way.

"What is written in the law?" Jesus asks.

The lawyer responds with the right words—the same answer Jesus himself gives when asked about the greatest commandment. He quotes Deuteronomy and Leviticus: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus says, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live."

But the lawyer isn't done. Still operating from a need for clarity and control, he presses: "And who is my neighbor?" He's essentially asking, "Where's the line? Who counts? How can I be sure I'm doing enough?"

It's a fair question from someone whose job was to define boundaries—between clean and unclean, righteous and unrighteous, insider and outsider.

And so Jesus tells a story.

A man is robbed, beaten, and left for dead. A priest—someone charged with upholding the holiness of Israel's worship—sees him but crosses to the other side. Then a Levite—another religious figure—does the same. Maybe they feared ritual impurity. Maybe they suspected a trap. Maybe they were just busy. Whatever the

reason, they walked on.

Let's not assume the worst. In fact, the story is more powerful if we imagine the priest and Levite truly believed they were doing the right thing—taking practical, responsible action.

Then Jesus introduces the Samaritan.

To the people listening, a Samaritan would be “the other”—an outsider by blood, religion, and culture. You can imagine them already dismissing him, bracing for the worst. But then Jesus says that the Samaritan sees the man, stops, and crosses the road to help.

That's the moment that interests me.

Jesus is critiquing institutional religion—not to tear it down, but to expose a danger: even those closest to sacred things can become so concerned with purity or reputation that they fail to act with compassion. Holiness, Jesus shows us, is not just about ritual fidelity. It's about mercy. The priest and the Levite didn't break any rules, but they failed to love.

And that leads us to the central question: Why does the Samaritan cross the road?

The lawyer answers it, actually.

When Jesus finishes the story, he asks, “Which of these three was a neighbor to the man?”

“The one who showed mercy,” the lawyer replies.

Exactly. The Samaritan doesn't act from obligation. He's not following a rule. No one is going to praise him. In fact, he might face criticism from his own people. He acts from something deeper: compassion. The kind of love that flows naturally from a heart that's been reshaped.

Jesus doesn't say, “Good, now you understand.” He says: “Go and do likewise.”

But—and this is vital—you cannot go and do likewise by simply trying harder. The Gospel is not about behaving better. It's about becoming a certain kind of person—the kind of person for whom love becomes second nature. Not because of pressure. But because you live with Jesus in his Kingdom.

Author Glennon Doyle tells a story that captures this beautifully. Before her son's first day of third grade, she wrote him a letter about a boy she once knew—Adam. He was awkward, left out, different. Glennon never teased him, but she never helped him either. Never said hello. Never asked him to play. She still aches about that.

In the letter to her son, she wrote, “When you see someone being hurt or left out, and your heart starts to hurt—that's compassion. That's God's way of saying, ‘Do something.’” She told him to trust that ache. Let it move him.

That ache—that's not weakness. That's the first whisper of God's presence. Not a moral burden. An invitation into life.

Sometimes, as with Wesley Autrey—the construction worker and Navy veteran who jumped onto New York City subway tracks to save a stranger—we respond instinctively. Autrey later said, “I saw someone who needed help. I did what I could.” That's a heart trained by love.

More often, it's quieter.

In Alan Levi's novel *Theo of Golden*, a man named Theo moves into a small town. He starts buying portraits from a local artist—portraits of everyday people: the barista, the janitor, the bus driver. Then he gives each person their portrait. But more than that, he tells them what he sees in them—dignity, courage, light.

People begin to change. Not dramatically, but meaningfully. They begin to believe they matter. A new kind of community begins to form. Not because of a program, but because one man kept crossing the road in love.

That's what it means to live in the Kingdom of God.

The Christian crosses the road—not to earn points, not to be heroic, not to prove anything—but because we

can. Because we live from a different source. We are not governed by fear, scarcity, or busyness, but by love.

And that kind of life doesn't begin in a dramatic moment. It begins in the quiet place, where we are with Jesus. Where we learn to trust him. Where we practice prayer, study, solitude, service—not to impress God, but to open ourselves to God's transforming presence.

As we are with Jesus, we become like him. And then we begin to do what he would do if he were living our life.

This is what spiritual formation looks like. This is how eternal life begins—here and now.

So the question is not, "What must I do to be good enough?" The question is: "Am I living in the Kingdom? Am I with Jesus? Am I becoming the kind of person who sees, who stops, who loves?"

That's the life we're invited into.

So when the moment comes—when you see someone left out, in pain, in the ditch—don't ask, "What do I have to do?"

Ask, "What can love do here?"

And then—go and do likewise.

Amen