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Lesson: Deuteronomy 30:9-14; Luke 10:25-37

²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” ²⁷He answered, “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.” ²⁸And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” ³⁷He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

I never thought in my life that I would be this excited about worshiping in a fellowship hall! It has been a long road to get to this point, and I truly am thankful for the patience you’ve had since... January. When we started the renovations, the setup crew was constantly freezing their tails off just after the first glimpses of sunlight, and in recent weeks the teardown crew has been baking in the heat and humidity. In addition to those teams, there is also the choir, the Greeters, the ushers, and the Assisting Ministers who have made our worship possible. I believe it is fitting to give them all a round of applause for their dedication and hard work through these months.

Clearly there is still more to go, and the Building Committee will keep us updated on all that. Yet, being in this room today makes me realize we are almost there. We anticipate crossing through this breezeway – our proverbial Jordan River – and move into the Promised Land... ...which is fitting with our first lesson today. The passage from Deuteronomy is set just before the Hebrew people crossed into the Promised Land. Our reading comes from what is known as Moses' third sermon at this occasion. Imagine that: we've spent six months worshipping outside, but they have done it for forty years. They must be excited about what is in store for them across the Jordan River. The point of this sermon comes down to this: the people can always come back to God. As the future unfolds, they may go astray, but God will always welcome them back. Not only that, but God wants them to prosper abundantly as they set off into something new. Moses preaches that God wants them to prosper “in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil.” God wants all life to prosper around them.

Now, this isn't what is called “the prosperity gospel” today, which is the teaching that if you would only toe-the-line enough, then God will reward you with tangible rewards. This passage could be manipulated to support that idea, but the broader view of Deuteronomy, of scripture, and of life itself tells us that such a proposition is not true. So then what message does this passage offer us? It is this: God delights when life prospers.

When Moses says in verse 11, “Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away,” we should be clear that this is a command that the people be faithful to the covenant God has created. Returning to God does not require an elaborate scheme that is housed in heaven, as Moses puts it, nor is the path of returning to God hard to decipher, as though one were trying to perceive it from across the sea. How to return to God is already in the people's mouths and in their hearts, Moses says; they don't have to overthink how to do it. The promise of this sermon is that God is already intimately close to them. If they go astray, they won't have to labor physically

or mentally to re-obtain their connection to God. As the sermon goes on, it is revealed that God's closeness is witnessed as the people see life in its various forms prospering in them, around them, and through them. When life is abundant among their people, their livestock, the plants, and the land. What God desires is for the people to see God present in the connections we have. The connections with other people, but also with the broader ecosystem in which we are a part. When we see and value those connections, we tend to nurture and support them. As a result life thrives, and we are called to see God present in and delighting in such connections.

Our gospel passage emphasizes this understanding of God delighting in life's connections thriving. A lawyer approaches Jesus and asks what must be done for him to inherit eternal life. You know the parable: there's a traveler, some robbers, a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan. I don't need to retell it for you. But there is a detail that preachers often gloss over, and very often it is at the expense of the parable's message. The setting of the parable is a road between Jerusalem and Jericho. There is only one road between these two cities, which are only an hour's drive from one another. The reason why – to this day – there is only one road between the two locations is because the elevation change makes it very treacherous. Jerusalem is situated about 2,500 feet above sea level, but Jericho is near the Dead Sea – the lowest point on earth – and that city is situated 850 feet below sea level. So that is a huge change in elevation. The parable says the man was traveling down the road – *Καταβαίνω*, “to descend” in Greek. English may make it sound like he was walking along a road, but the Greek is specific that he was going down this road. Shortly after the parable says a priest was also descending down the road – the same word – and then it says the Levite was likewise traveling.

Preachers will often say the priest and Levite were likely preparing for their religious duties, and helping this beaten man on the side of the road would have ritually defiled them. That's absolute nonsense. Back in that day and to this day, Jewish teachings prioritize life

over other commandments. This particular priest and Levite had a duty to care for this beaten traveler. Even if that tidbit of knowledge about Jewish ethics doesn't convince you, then how about this: they were descending the road. That means they were leaving the city of their religious obligations, so being "ritually defiled" was not an excuse for them. The only explanation remaining for why these two characters in the parable wouldn't help the traveler left for dead is because they were jerks. These two simply didn't care, and they couldn't be bothered by someone in need of help. The literary twist is that someone unexpected – a Samaritan – is the one who is merciful. The passage finishes with Jesus teaching that we should live mercifully. That in itself is another literary twist, because the lawyer didn't start the conversation by asking how to be a good neighbor. Rather, he asked Jesus how to inherit eternal life.

Perhaps that discrepancy is the point of this parable. Instead of being like this lawyer who focuses on himself and how he can find advantage in a scenario like eternal life, his focus is redirected by Jesus. If he truly desires life – and the abundance of it – then he needs to look beyond himself to relationships and connections we all have. Rather than being solely focused on what occurs after death and how to set up our individual selves for the best result in that realm, and rather than resorting to our selfish tendency to behave like jerks who treat other people and the rest of creation as disposable, our teacher redirects our attention to life here and now. Focus on being merciful here in this lifetime you have, and you will find abundant life in that pursuit of being merciful. Jesus inspires us to care for and be merciful in our relationships and connections on this side of death.

We are in relationship with others – people, creatures, the divine – and often we cannot fully comprehend these connections. Yet know this: God desires for these relationships – and life itself – to prosper abundantly, and when our lives are in tune with these connections, we may better see how intimately close God has been all along. Amen.