

Luke 10:25-37

A 13-year-old Steve attended church every week with his parents. This particular Sunday, he had stayed after the worship service to ask his pastor this pressing question: “Pastor, if I raise my finger, will God know which one I’m going to raise even before I raise it?” The pastor replied, “Yes, Steve, God knows everything.” Steve then pulled out a Life magazine that depicted two starving children in Africa. He asked his pastor, “Well, does God know about this and what’s gonna to happen to these kids?” The pastor gave a similar response: “Steve, I know you don’t understand, but yes, God knows about that.” If you were Steve, would you have been satisfied with the pastor’s answer? Well, Steve wasn’t. He walked out of the church that day never to worship at a Christian church again.

When I was growing up, I used to think answers were always better than questions. I did my hardest to get the right answers because I thought if I did, I would become like my sister Emily who got straight A’s all her life (which I never did, by the way!). At school, we were encouraged to regurgitate what we learned in the form of bubbles on standardized tests. When I became a teacher, I realized that my teachers had lied to me when they said, “There are no wrong answers.” Guess what? There ARE wrong answers! I heard plenty of them when I became a teacher.

So what was so wrong about the pastor’s answer that turned Steve away from the faith? Isn’t it true that God knows EVERYTHING?

There’s a saying that goes, “They don’t care what you know until they know that you care.” In light of that saying, how would you have answered Steve differently? In generations to come, I believe this saying will become more important than ever. Our post-pandemic church will depend on HOW we care rather than WHAT we know.

In today's text, the lawyer, who is more like a law expert in the Jewish tradition, poses this question to Jesus: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" At first glance, we interpret this as "What do we have to do to go to heaven?" In the Jewish tradition, "inheriting" is what the ultimate insiders did--fathers to sons. And "eternal life," translated from Greek *zoe aionios* was a way of referring to the "life of God." So then, the story Jesus tells is really about what it looks like to be an "insider in the life of God." In other words, the Jewish understanding of eternal life had to do with "being in the know with God" and "living a full life with God" rather than where we go after we die.

Jesus often answered questions with questions or with stories but rarely with straightforward answers. When the lawyer asks the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus answers with a story, but it's not about WHO the neighbor is but rather HOW to BE a neighbor. And by BEING this neighbor, you can inherit eternal life--You can have the fullness of life that comes from being with God.

Remember when I said that there are wrong answers? Well, guess what? There are wrong questions too! You see, the question the lawyer was asking was a transactional question. He was asking the question so that he could do the right thing so that he could be IN with God. "If I do this, then I'll get that." It's the same question that the rich young man asked Jesus but went away sad because he couldn't do what Jesus was asking him to do. It was the same kind of question the goats on the left side asked in Matthew 25, "Jesus, if we KNEW those who were hungry and naked were really YOU, we would have fed them and clothed them! Why didn't you tell us so that we could have done it?" Wrong question!

By telling the story about the Good Samaritan, Jesus' point is, it's not about WHAT we know—it's about HOW we love. Fullness of life does not hinge on how we answer transactional questions. It's about how we live out relational questions: How do we grow, how do we love, how do we experience the fullness of God together? And relational questions are almost always answered with transformative stories.

So how DO we love? Well, what did the Good Samaritan do? He drew near to the one who was beaten up--near enough to see the seriousness of the wounds on his body. We can't begin to love if we refuse to go near and acknowledge those who are beaten on the side of the road. Who are those people?

The man who is robbed is the only one without a title or position in this story. Even those robbing him have a title: They're the robbers! He's just a "man". If you translate it literally from Greek, it's "some guy," "some dude"—a no name—a nobody. Who are the wounded nobodies of this world that God is

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asking us to care for? Who are the wounded nobodies at our church? In our community? Who are the wounded nobodies who are fleeing Afghanistan today? You see, what makes nobodies into our neighbors is our care for them. How we have “eternal life” here depends on how we love the faceless nobodies. The growth of our faith depends on how we invest our time, energy, and money into such people. That is the way for us to love our neighbor, to love God, to be insiders in the life of God. After all, isn’t that what Jesus did? It’s not what we know—it’s how we love.

One of my favorite stories of Daniel Ervin, one of the other two resident ministers who served with me, was when he made visits to very well-educated members’ houses one afternoon. (Imagine that—well-educated people in Ann Arbor!) As he sat and listened to their brilliant talks and stared at impressive degrees on the walls, all he could do to not feel so worthless was to remind himself again and again, “I’m baptized, I’m baptized, I’m baptized.” I loved how Daniel took refuge in his baptism. Let that be all we need to know—that we are loved and claimed by God in baptism—so that we can love our neighbors as ourselves.

Because you see, the priest and Levite who passed by the man knew too much. If the man was dead, they didn’t want to touch him or be near him because they’d be considered unclean. The priest and the Levite were too concerned with doing the right thing that they couldn’t do the loving thing. On the other hand, the Samaritan wasn’t concerned about doing the right thing; he was concerned about doing the loving thing. After all, isn’t that what Jesus did? He rarely did the right thing when he was on earth—he always did the loving thing. And the loving thing is always the right thing. It’s not WHAT you know but HOW you love.

Furthermore, our church needs to go beyond the four walls of the building to show God’s love. Notice how care for the neighbor takes place on the ROAD to Jericho? Not in Jerusalem and not in the temple. It’s not WHERE you love, it’s HOW you love. Churches will no longer be defined by what we do in the church building but rather what we do outside our four walls. This is especially true in this time of

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pandemic when we've all witnessed what it means to love and evangelize in the virtual space. During the pandemic, this one church started collecting online prayer requests from the community. It became so good at reaching out for prayer requests and praying for the community, even the mayor started posting prayer requests for the town on the Facebook page of this church. You see, it's not WHERE you love, it's HOW you love.

So, my first teaching job was at Deerfield High School in Illinois. Deerfield is a very affluent suburb of Chicago, and the school has extremely high academic standards. They CARED what teachers knew. Sometimes, I'd stay up all night preparing my lessons because I was afraid that my students knew more than I did (and they probably did!). It goes without saying that by the time the bell rang, my students were in their seats, with homework and books on their desks, ready to start the class.

Then I moved to LA after the first year of teaching at Deerfield and started teaching at Hollywood High School in the middle of the school year. I still remember my first day at Hollywood High.

It was students' first day back from winter break. By the time the bell rang, there were only 4 students in the classroom. "Where is everybody?" I asked. The four students answered, "They'll come, Miss." And come they did, strolling in 10, 20 minutes late, without books and DEFINITELY without homework. I thought it was just THAT class, but it was like that throughout the day--day after day. I went home crying every single day.

Why wouldn't they just focus in class? Why wouldn't they do their homework? Then, I got to know them. About how most of them only had a single parent at home, about how they were pressured to join gangs at an early age, about how they were always scared if they were going to get jumped or jacked on the way to and from school. No wonder they didn't have their homework!

I started listening to their stories and stayed after school to tutor them and changed books so we could read about a teenage single dad struggling to finish high school rather than *Of Mice and Men*. (Nothing against *Of Mice and Men*—great book to teach, and it's really short!) In turn, they taught me how to love deeper and laugh harder and teach a WHOLE lot better. They didn't care what I knew until they knew that I cared.

God didn't ask WHO will I love? God asked HOW will I love my people? God didn't ask how much will it cost me to love? God asked what more can I give to love my people?

So, going back to Steve’s story in the beginning—what was it about the pastor’s answer that didn’t sit well with Steve? Perhaps it was because the pastor failed to grasp the relational question behind Steve’s question. Steve wasn’t merely asking an existential question about the nature of suffering. Likely behind Steve’s inquiry about children in Africa were more personal questions about life and faith. Perhaps Steve wondered why God would allow the suffering he himself had experienced in his 13 years of life, which included bullying at school, financial struggles at home, and most painfully, being relinquished for adoption by his birth parents. As Steve was trying to make sense of the pain in our world, he wanted his pastor to understand and help him make sense of his own pain.

How do I know Steve so well? I bet you know him too. His name is Steve Jobs, founder and CEO of Apple. He wasn’t asking to see what the pastor knew but rather, if the pastor cared—if God cared—about him and about the sufferings of others around him. Friends, it’s not what we know but it’s how we love.

And that’s what I love about First Pres. When I was a resident here four years ago, I learned so much and grew so much. But what I learned the most was how to be loved by a congregation. I understand we have new resident ministers who have just arrived. Welcome! Resident ministers, you’re in for a treat because I have never met a congregation that wants to love on the resident ministers more than this congregation. First Pres, when I was here, you never asked “WHAT is there to love about you?” You always asked, “HOW can we love you more?” You knew you had one and only one job when it came to the resident ministers: To love them. And that’s the greatest gift any pastor can ask for.

Living life to the fullest with God doesn’t depend on dogmas or doctrines or creeds or history lessons or pat answers. It depends on how we love our neighbors by asking relational questions and living out transformational stories. Don’t do the right thing. Do the loving thing. Because the loving thing is always the right thing. Amen.

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