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Today I have no entertaining illustrations to offer you, no riveting metaphors or similies, no exhilarating images. I don't even have any jokes for you, even though there's a lawyer in this morning's Gospel—a *lawyer*, for cryin' out loud!! No, I will resist the temptation. I think today's Gospel stands well enough on its own.

What we have here is a familiar story that Jesus tells a lawyer who stands up to test him. This lawyer comes to Jesus to examine him about his knowledge of scripture. Religious people loves this, by the way, when folks approach them to test them of their knowledge of the Bible. I never said I wouldn't be sarcastic, by the way.

“So, Jesus,” the lawyer asks Jesus, “what do I need to do to get to heaven?”

“Love God,” Jesus answers, “and love your neighbor as yourself.”

The lawyer hears this and rejoices. He loves his neighbors! He loves his neighborhood, filled with other wealthy and educated people, just like him. No problem, the lawyer tells Jesus...Done! Feeling smug in front of his audience, however, the lawyer pushes his point, so he asks Jesus this question, “And just who is my neighbor, Jesus?”

He assumes Jesus will tell him what he wants to hear, that his neighbors are the ones who live like him, the ones who act like him and dress like him and think like him. But Jesus does not tell this lawyer what he wants to hear. In fact, Jesus tells this lawyer precisely what he does *not* want to hear. And he does so by way of a parable, the parable of the Good Samaritan, familiar enough to most of us here.

Here, you have a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. Robbers attack him, strip him naked, beat him bloody and leave him for dead. Three people pass by. The first two are religious people, the first a priest, the second a scholar. They do not stop to help this man. The third, however, stops to help him. And this third man is a Samaritan, an enemy of the Jewish people. It would be like a Christian helping a Muslim.

The church people glance his way, hurry on their way and leave the man for dead, maybe mumbling a prayer as they pass him by. And he's one of their own, a Jew, like them! But the Samaritan—arch-enemy of the Jewish man—stops and takes care of him and saves his life. The Samaritan clearly is the hero here, because this is a hard thing for him to do—the Samaritan has been raised to hate this beaten and bloody man, he hates the way he thinks, he hates the way he acts and worships and looks and dresses.

And yet he stops and tends to his wounds and brings him to safety and saves his life.

Why does the Samaritan do this? Because he's a good guy, a real hero? Yes, that's part of it. But the Samaritan helps this man because he first loves himself, something the priest and scholar do not do. The Samaritan understands his value in this world, he understands his noble calling to help people out, no matter who they are, no matter what they worship, no matter what they think. This kind of bold compassion stems from a confident love of self.

Lutherans aren't good at this. Most Christians aren't good at this.

We are better at self-loathing. We are better at basking in our insecurities. We are brilliant at inaction, blaming it on our rejection of works righteousness, but instead it comes from pure cowardice...because we don't know how to love ourselves first...and therein lies the problem. This is why there are not many Lutheran Samaritans out there.

Because we need to love ourselves before we can love anybody else. Take any of your modern day Samaritans—Abraham Lincoln, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr....somewhere along the way, all of these people had it branded into their brains that they were priceless, valuable, irreplaceable children of God. They were raised to believe with full conviction that God loves them, and that love then compelled them to make bold, brilliant strokes in American history. They are models of compassion because they acted from a gut knowledge that they had value and worth by virtue of being creatures of God, not because they were black or white or rich or poor or smart or stupid. They were Samaritans because they loved themselves first and that gave them the strength to love other people, even people who hated their guts.

It's the same principle as when you fly on an airplane and the emergency procedures tell you to place the oxygen mask on your own face first before putting in on a child. A dead adult cannot rescue a helpless baby.

The lawyer doesn't like Jesus' answer because he doesn't love himself. He hates himself because he swindles old ladies in order to make a buck, that he manipulates his clients, that his wealth and reputation are built on the backs of other people's failed lives. He doesn't love himself, and so he cannot possibly love even his like-minded neighbors, much less those who do not think like him or act like him.

I commend to you this Gospel, and I challenge you to find yourself in it.

Are you the lawyer, who lives in self-hatred and is subsequently rendered powerless in helping others? Many people are like that lawyer. We

don't love our neighbors because we don't love ourselves. We can't possibly help the beaten man bleeding in the ditch because he is worthless to us because we feel worthless ourselves. We can't possibly love Jesus because we see nothing in ourselves worth loving. Most people are the lawyer.

Are you the priest or the religious scholar, pre-occupied by your own piety and self-righteousness...so convinced of your salvation by faith alone that you're afraid to get blood on your shoes?

Or are you the bleeding man in the ditch, beaten and bruised and left to die? Are you crying out for help and nobody seems to hear you? If you are this man, I have both good news and bad news.

Bad news first, just to get it out of the way. If you are that man bleeding in the ditch, the chances are good the church will fail you, in fact the chances are 2 out of 3. The church is made up of people—broken and sinful people. The odds are good that at some point the church will let you down, the church will make decisions you hate or welcome people you hate, people you don't want to claim as your neighbors. That's the bad news.

But, if you're that man in the ditch, the good news is, help is on the way. You are saved from dying alone in that ditch not because the Lutheran hand rescues you, or the Methodist hand or the Catholic hand...you are rescued from that ditch only by the hand of Christ. You can only be little Samaritans in this world, you can only love your neighbors, when you first see the hand of Jesus reaching down to pull you out of the ditch of death...and realize that Jesus has such compassion and love for you that he rescues you from death. If you don't get that Jesus loves you, you won't really get what it means to love your neighbor.

When we finally see Jesus as the Big Samaritan in this world, someone who defines his neighbors as those who hate him most and then proves his love for them by dying for them, then we can finally understand our own value as human beings and children of God—people worth dying for...and then we can reach out to others in need, little Samaritans, motivated not by self-righteousness or piety or even religion, but by a genuine and holy self-love that comes from Jesus Christ.