

“Our Great Heritage: Christian Vocation”

Have you ever noticed that there are some words and phrases that originate from the Bible that have made their way into our everyday language? In fact, it seems that there are examples of this where people use these words without even realizing where they come from. For example, a phrase that is quoted frequently enough says, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” There is certainly truth to that statement. Many people credit the phrase to Abraham Lincoln, who used it in a famous speech. But he didn’t come up with it. Jesus said it (Matthew 12:25). Or how often do you hear people describe a situation by comparing it to David and Goliath? They use these names to describe any sort of competition where the opponents don’t seem evenly matched, just like the boy David did not seem to stand a chance against the giant soldier Goliath, as the Bible records (1 Samuel 17). Many people allude to this Bible story, perhaps in many cases not even knowing the Bible story.

You may have already figured out where I am going with this. People use the term “Good Samaritan” all the time. Anyone who helps someone else out, especially a stranger, is a Good Samaritan. And like many other words and phrases that come originally from the Bible now used in everyday speech, many who use the term probably don’t know where it comes from.

It comes from the story that Jesus told in our sermon text today, our Gospel from St. Luke. The story goes like this: a man is making his way from Jerusalem to Jericho. By the way, the landscape between Jerusalem and Jericho is full of hills and valleys, steep, rocky cliffs, and so on, that make it a prime location for the thieves and robbers that show up next in the story. Well, as the man was walking, the robbers jumped out from their hiding spot and attacked him. They beat him so badly that they may have thought they were leaving his corpse behind. Well, along comes a priest travelling the same road. He sees the man, lying there nearly dead, and he walks right around him. He crosses to the other side of the street so as not to get too close to him. Along comes a Levite, and he does the same thing.

Finally, along comes the man by whose description we know the story: the Good Samaritan. He sees the man who is lying there beaten and left for dead, and he helps him. Remember why this is such a big deal. The people listening to Jesus would have assumed that the beaten man, like them, was a Jew. The Samaritans were enemies of the Jews. Relations between Jews and Samaritans were so bad that most Jews wouldn’t even go into Samaritan territory. They would walk around it, even if it doubled their travel. And the Samaritans generally felt the same way about the Jews. But this man did not let these cultural and historical differences get in the way. He saw that help was needed and he provided help. And not just a little, he helped the man to the fullest. He paid for his room in the inn and promised to pay for any expenses as he recovered there.

So what’s the point? There is an obvious application of Jesus’ story that we should always try to be more and more like the Good Samaritan. We should look to help others when they are in need. And that point is driven home even more fully as we consider the introduction to Jesus’ story.

Jesus told the story because an expert in the law wanted to test him. This expert asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” This expert also knew the answer. “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, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” At least in theory, the person who could perfectly carry out God’s law as summarized this way could earn eternal life. Jesus’ own words say as much. But Jesus was trying to drive home an important truth that this man could not earn eternal life, because no one can or ever could keep those commands of God perfectly. But the expert thought that he could. He wanted to justify himself. So he said, essentially, “if I need to love my neighbor, then tell me who that neighbor is so that I can love him or her.” Do you get the implication? Certainly I don’t need to love everyone. Certainly I don’t need to love my enemies. Certainly I don’t need to love the Samaritans.

But Jesus’ story said otherwise. Jesus’ answer to “Who is my neighbor?” is “Be a neighbor to everyone who needs your help.”

Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan is one part of Scripture among many that touches on the topic around which our service this morning is based, that of Christian Vocation. Christian Vocation has many implications

and applications, but it largely boils down to the importance which God places on us caring for, loving, and serving others. To understand the teaching of Christian Vocation properly, of course, we have to admit that we can and will never do this perfectly. We have already missed too many opportunities not only to love God, but also to love the people around us. We have already missed too many opportunities to be kind and helpful and caring. And no doubt, in no small part due to our sinful natures, we will miss plenty of opportunities in the future, too. So we do not come at the topic of Christian vocation in the hopes of earning God's favor or earning eternal life by the things that we do.

In fact, this whole concept reinforces for us the value of what Christ has done. Think of all the similarities that exist between our Savior and the Samaritan in his parable. Only instead of one man lying near death on the side of the road, Jesus looked upon a whole world of sinners, people dead in sin. He saw that they were, by their own nature and will, hostile to him. But he loved and served them. He loved and served us. He paid every price that needed to be paid, including his own innocent suffering and gruesome death, in order to give us the help that we needed.

And now he says, "Serve others. Follow my example. Love your neighbor as yourself."

So, why did this teaching become such a major concern at the time of the Lutheran Reformation? You may recall that Martin Luther became a monk in 1505. He did so because of at least two major misunderstandings. The first was that he needed to do something in order to make God love him. We've already talked a bit about that today. The other major misunderstanding that led Luther and many others into the monastic life, the life of a monk or a nun, was the belief that this work was more important to God. It was on a higher spiritual plane than being a miner or a farmer or a shoemaker or anything else. Luther thought at the time that the best way in which he could serve God was by being a monk.

But actually that wasn't true at all. In his faithful study of God's Word, Luther recognized that there were no commands there about becoming a monk. There were no suggestions that a church job was more important than a secular job. In fact, there were plenty of places where the Scriptures plainly speak about the value of work whether or not it is directly associated with the church. There are all sorts of reminders that people can serve God in a variety of ways, making use of a variety of gifts, and being in a variety of situations. Anything that is not sinful in itself can be done to the glory of God. Even eating and drinking. Even making shoes and growing crops and mining ore.

And the reality was that being a monk was a worse way to serve God. The life of a monk was about separating from people, not serving them. It was far too inwardly focused rather than outwardly focused. And, most importantly, while so many other jobs do have biblical support and backing, being a monk does not.

So, what does the doctrine of Christian Vocation have to say to us today? Well, it has a lot to say. It invites each of us to examine our lives according to the various jobs and responsibilities we have. Are you a father or a mother? Are you a husband or a wife? Are you a child? Are you a friend, a neighbor, or a coworker? Are you a boss or an employee? Are you a member of your neighborhood or community? I hope you understand what I mean. You may fit into nearly every one of the categories I mentioned, or you may fit into very few. But each one means you have responsibilities and ways in which you can show your love to those around you. And some of those opportunities simply present themselves, like the one in front of the Good Samaritan.

Parents, love your children. Children, obey your parents. Students treat your teachers with respect and be eager to learn from them. Teachers, serve the students in your care. Show love to your friends, your neighbors, your co-workers, your family members, or anyone else whose needs become apparent to you. It is really an endless list, based on the reality of your days and weeks, your circumstances and situations, of ways that you can serve God in your various vocations.

So be a Good Samaritan. Serve others in love because God has served you with his love. Give your best effort in every endeavor to the glory of God. He has already forgiven you for the times that you fail to do so, and he is pleased with your service to him in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

The Text: Luke 10:25–37 (NIV)

²⁵ On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

²⁶ “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

²⁷ He answered, “ ‘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, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

²⁸ “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

²⁹ But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

³⁰ In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³² So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

³⁶ “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

³⁷ The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”