

Several years ago cartoonist Daniel Erlander drew a little picture of a man kneeling and praying to Jesus and then in front of him and facing him is Jesus and he is surrounded by all these people of different ages, races, and abilities. The man says, "Why is it that whenever I ask Jesus to come into my life he always brings his friends?" The women who participate in the women's Bible study will be familiar with it.

That little picture always makes me think of those Christians who ask if I've invited Jesus into my heart? Of course I know what they're getting at but a little voice in my head also laughs and thinks, "Do you really know what you are asking for?" Because Jesus has this "unfortunate" habit of bringing his friends with him. And his friends aren't always the nicest and most socially acceptable people in the world. We see that causing problems for Jesus throughout his public ministry as upright people get upset because Jesus keeps bringing his friends with him.

The issue of Jesus' friends comes up again in our gospel reading for today too. We have the famous parable of the Good Samaritan. We have to take two steps back though before we can actually look at it.

Jesus is on his final journey to Jerusalem. Everything in Luke's gospel from 9:51 onward needs to be interpreted in light of that journey and the upcoming arrest and crucifixion. The parable of the Good Samaritan comes up in Chapter 10. According to Luke's gospel, where is the first place Jesus goes as he begins his journey to Jerusalem? He goes to Samaria - the land of the Samaritans. And, how is he received? Not well. Not well at all.

This comes as no surprise. The Jews and the Samaritans hated each other. I consider it to be the longest running family feud in world history. No one knows who started it. Even today no amount of historical digging can unearth the truth of when or why the feud began. We can't even tell for sure who the Samaritans were. They seem to be some sort of a mix of disenfranchised Jews mixed with foreign and native peoples. We know they were a conservative group. They recognized Moses and

the first five books of the Bible as authoritative, just like Jews. But they rejected Jewish religious leadership and worship in the temple.

And yet Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem by journeying through Samaritan villages. When they reject him you'll remember that the ever loveable disciples James and John say, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But Jesus rebuked them.

Taking one step forward we discover that Jesus sends seventy of his followers out ahead of him in pairs to every town he intended to go on his journey. They travel out and are wildly successful. They return with joy at how well things went. Jesus teaches them that they should rejoice at the work they have been privileged to accomplish and they should rejoice that their names are written in heaven.

That sets the stage for the lawyers interruption that began our gospel reading. A lawyer - quite possibly one of the 70 he had sent out - asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" As we read in our gospel lesson Jesus replies, "What is written

in the law? What do you read there?" He 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 you mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And Jesus said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this and live."

But of course, being a lawyer, he wants clarification about vagueness. He asks, "And who is my neighbor?" This is an interesting question. It seems innocent enough on the surface, yet it hides a deep darkness. He isn't asking so much who is my neighbor - he knows that he has to love his neighbors - he's asking who does he *not need* to love? Or, who is it okay to ignore, to treat with apathy, perhaps even to hate?

If there was anyone that Jews thought should be hated it was Samaritans. The parable of the Good Samaritan answers: nobody; all are neighbors. All deserve mercy from us. All deserve love. Jesus ends by saying to the lawyer, "Go and do likewise."

We are included in the command to, "Go and do likewise." Of course loving every person is a really tough thing to do.

And it gets really complicated. Sometimes it's easy. Some people are just easy to love. They're pleasant and kind and fun and giving. Some people are harder. They're arrogant, annoying, abusive or destructive. There's the people at work who you know will sabotage your project or passively aggressively undermine you every chance you get; and they'll delight in doing it. Loving someone who is out to hurt you, or who will delight in seeing you fail is really hard. And of course, how do you love someone who is being destructive.

I must confess that one of my all-time favorite scenes in a movie is a scene I should not like. It's from the 1980's movie Witness and Harrison Ford is playing an undercover police officer who is dressed and living among some Amish people in order to protect them as witnesses in an upcoming trial. There is the scene where he and the Amish family are in town in their buggy and some locals start taunting them. If you know the scene you'll remember one of them rubs the Amish man's face with his ice cream cone. This taunting goes on for some time but the Amish people just passively accept the mockery. While Harrison Ford's character isn't being taunted he's eventually had enough. Not being Amish he's not bound by their code of conduct so he gets up and hauls off and punches the one guy right in the face.

He breaks the guy's nose, his jaw and knocks out some teeth all in one punch. You're not supposed to feel this way, but I at least want to give a cheer of support. He deserved it.

How do you love someone who taunts you? How do you love the bullies of the world? How do you love someone when you've searched and prayed and looked to find some good in a person but can't find anything? How do you love someone when you know that your love is going to be turned back against you? How do you love someone when you feel like you're just enabling him or her?

Jesus died for every person who ever lived on this planet - and who ever will. The command to love is universal. Even though God is ultimately the judge of people, and God makes the decision between heaven or hell, God still loves them all. We therefore must also.

When loving gets complicated we can't quit. We just can't. Sometimes love is pretty traditional: a hug and forgiveness. Sometimes love is having mercy on an enemy, like the Good Samaritan did. Sometimes tough love is the route of ultimately loving someone. Sometimes loving someone means breaking off

ties with him or her - at least for a while - because as best as you can tell that is what is called for. Sometimes loving someone costs a lot. Sometimes you just don't know how to love.

Jesus doesn't give a list of answers, just the principle to love. As we always do when we face difficult challenges in our lives of faith we pray, we worship, we talk with others, we seek outside help when loving gets complicated. And sometimes our best intentions just simply go wrong.

God alone knows how to make things perfect. And for some reason known only to God, we do not know how to love perfectly all the time. But when we strive to do what we can in the best interest of the other person God's will is done. God's kingdom is built. And God's love comes to life.

Love with wisdom. Love with courage. Love with delight. For in doing so you get to glimpse at God's most amazing work.

Amen