

Yesterday, Trae Fistler and I and about 75 other men went to Mapleton and helped perform acts of mercy for a community that has been dealing with the affects of a tornado since April. For about two hours Trae and I scraped linoleum off the kitchen floor of a house that had been damaged by the tornado. Trae and I have blisters to show for our efforts, and even though it was fifty degrees outside we were sweating. And to top it all off the couple we helped were Roman Catholic. Because of all of that Trae and I have inherited eternal life. We are better than all of you. What did you do for your neighbor yesterday, or the day before that or even this morning? Did you love your neighbor as yourself? Have you shown mercy to your neighbor?

Isn't that what you believe when you read the story of the Good Samaritan? Isn't salvation all about loving your neighbor? Isn't getting to heaven all about providing for the needs of your neighbor; showing him mercy and love and charity? Don't you compare yourself to your neighbor in determining how good you are? Don't you say to yourself, "I have done good today." "I have not harmed my neighbor." "I am a good person." "I have shown compassion." "God will find favor with me." "Surely, because of my good works, I will be in heaven when Jesus comes again."

But as soon as we say that, you can ask Trae and me, "How about today, have you loved your neighbor today?" Or Friday, "Did you love your neighbor on Friday?" or "At any point in your life, have you not loved your neighbor?" "Or if we get old or become injured and can't physically show mercy to our neighbor, are we saved then?" If the answer to any of these questions is no, Trae and I have sinned and fallen short of God's glory.

But if we say yes, and you know we can't; but if we did, you can ask a follow up question, "Have you loved your neighbor enough, even as yourselves? or, 'Have you loved God enough, even above yourselves and all things?'" And the answer would be of course, "No." And we would be instantly condemned to hell, where we would suffer pain and the gnashing of teeth. Our good works, our acts of mercy, do not accomplish our salvation; because they are not good enough, they are not merciful enough. And besides that, our good works are not done for God, He does not need them. Our good works are done for our neighbor, who daily needs our love and compassion and mercy. God uses us, His beloved sons and daughters, to care for the widows and orphans, the sick and in need, the suffering and the hurting. As the banner says, ***We are joined together in Christ, for the Church and the world.*** We are God's hands and feet, showing mercy; all to the glory of God.

In today's Gospel lesson, the lawyer asks Jesus a question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responded, "What is written in the law?" The lawyer responded, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind"; "and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus responded, "You have answered correctly, do this and live."

The lawyer wants to justify himself, he wants to prove that he is good and worthy of heaven. He wants to show that he has kept the law perfectly. He does not want to

depend on anyone else. The lawyer is proud and arrogant and boastful because of his position and status. But with Jesus' questions the lawyer knows he is in trouble. He knows that if he claims to love God, he also must love his neighbor. If he says he loves his neighbor as himself, someone can ask, "Where is the proof?" And because he is in this position he asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" The lawyer tries to deflect attention from his unworthiness, his failure to keep the law, by alluding to the fact that the law is the problem, the law is unclear. The question implies that there are those who are not our neighbor. The question implies that there are those who are not worthy of God's love even our love.

The reason the lawyer asks the question, "Who is my neighbor?" is because he, along with the Pharisees, would exclude those who do not know the law, or those who do not keep the law. He would exclude the Samaritans because they are commoners, they despised God by worshipping false gods. Samaritans were considered unclean, the outcast, and marriage with them was forbidden. The lawyer would exclude outsiders, non Jews, the Gentiles. He and the Pharisees felt it was God-pleasing to show hatred toward these groups. But at the top of the list for the lawyer, the list of whom he should love, would be the priest and the Levites. That is why the story about the Good Samaritan was a shock to the lawyer. Jesus shows a priest and a Levite as models of being unmerciful and unloving; and He shows the Samaritan, the undesirable, as the hero in the story. It is the Samaritan that shows mercy and love.

And who is the Good Samaritan, it is Jesus Himself. The Good Samaritan is a parable of God's desire to give mercy and salvation to all men. Jesus alone is the One who is righteous and holy. Jesus alone is the only One who is good enough, merciful enough, compassionate enough, loving enough; today, yesterday and forever. Jesus is the merciful One who was kind and merciful to the Samaritans and spent a great deal of time among them healing the sick, driving out demons, freeing those in bondage and slavery. And who is the man left for dead? We are. We are the ones in need. And to restore life to us creatures of death, Jesus Himself was stripped, hung upon a cross, left for dead, and buried in a tomb. Yet, Jesus is arisen to pour the oil of the Spirit into our wounds in Holy Baptism and gives us the antiseptic wine of His blood in the Holy Supper.

Jesus has come into our world and called us by the Gospel to bring us into the inn of His Holy Church. Here Jesus pours out upon us abundant fruits of redemption in His Holy Word and Blessed Sacraments to care for us, His beloved people. Here, in His Church, through preaching and teaching, Jesus calls us to repentance, turning us away from sin and all evil that forgiveness and grace may abound. In Jesus Christ, we see the One who helps and supports us in every Physical need. Jesus is our neighbor who sets us free, that we might live before Him and with Him in righteous and purity forever; showing mercy to our neighbor. In the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, where we are joined as one to Jesus Christ, Who alone keeps the Commandments perfectly, we keep the Commandments of loving the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength and with all our mind; and loving our neighbor as ourselves. It is in Christ alone, by His abundant grace and mercy that we inherit eternal life. Amen.