

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Jody McDevitt, co-pastor

July 11, 2010
15th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 10:25-37

Do This and You Will Live!

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” asked the lawyer. It’s not surprising that people asked Jesus questions about the secret of life. He was a good teacher, a wise man, one who spoke and acted like a prophet of God. A good source for answers to an eternal question.

Today when people have a question, the first place they look for an answer is the Internet. So I typed “What is the secret of life?” into my Google bar, and any guesses how many websites came up as potential results? There were 74,600,000 results in one-quarter of a second.

Many people claim to know the secret of life. In recent years, Rhonda Byrne has made a fortune with her book, called *The Secret*, which has spawned multiple versions for age groups and life situations, a movie available in 30 different languages, iPhone apps and audio versions—all designed to share the secret of a joyful and financially prosperous life. There’s even a “Universal Bank Unlimited” check you can download and fill out. The instructions say make it out to yourself, in the amount you desire, in the currency of your choice. Put it in a prominent place and “every time you look at it, believe and feel that you have the money now!”

There have always been people willing to make money by taking advantage of others. And there have always been people who have believed that having money was the secret of life. But Jesus had a different answer. And like so many Biblical values, it was told in a story.

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. . .” this story begins, and we are caught up in one of the best stories Christians have used to guide our lives since Jesus walked the dusty roads of Galilee. This story shows us the secret of living. But the first characters the man on the road meets don’t know the answer. They live with the attitude, “What’s yours is mine and I’ll take it.” They are robbers.

Now it has been said that the entire Old Testament is commentary on covenant law, and that the 613 laws of Hebrew scripture can be reduced to 10, the laws we know as the Ten Commandments. It’s easy to see that these robbers are breaking the 8th commandment, “You shall not steal.” Thieves choose to ignore this most fundamental rule of human society—don’t take what isn’t yours. It’s not inherent in human nature to know this. Parents must teach their children not to steal, that stealing is wrong. But surely the lawyer who asked Jesus the secret to eternal life knew that robbery was wrong. He knew the commandments, he knew every law.

Blatant examples of robbery are all around us. But there are, of course, more subtle ways that people steal, and cover over their thievery with excuses. “Those copyright laws are so complicated, and no one will be hurt if I download this music and share it with my friends.” Or, “The government wastes so much money, I don’t need to report every dollar I make on my taxes.” Petty theft is still theft. And then there are the historical examples which shame nations. How is it that the United States is such a large and prosperous

nation? I think that the history books rightly record that there were many unscrupulous dealings with native peoples, otherwise known as “stealing.” “Oh, but that’s the way of the world, the way all nations operate.” As much as we might like to think that we’re above the attitude, “what’s yours is mine and I’ll take it,” none of us is entirely innocent of violating the 8th commandment.

Back to the man on the road. Now he’s beaten up and left for dead. Bleeding, semi-conscious, he sees a religious man coming toward him. Here is his hope, his salvation. But the man walks on by, no explanation given. And a second man like him—another religious leader, no less, does the same. Were they afraid to violate religious purity codes, were they afraid he might be HIV-positive, was he a different racial background, did they think he was already dead? We can speculate about their motives, but we know their actions. They live by the motto, “what’s mine is mine and I’ll keep it.” They are taking care of themselves first and foremost.

Now this attitude has many proponents, and many adherents. You can hear it in the debates over health care reform. “Keep your hands off my Medicare.” You can see it in our unwillingness to reduce our use of energy resources. We can’t imagine giving up our lifestyle or making sacrifices for the sake of unknown others in an unknown future. “What’s mine is mine and I’ll keep it” is not an outright violation of the 8th commandment, but it’s also not the secret of true living, eternal life. It is rooted in fear, the instinct of self-preservation, the survival strategy of looking out for #1.

So we must wait for the third sort of traveler on this road to come by. This man happens to be a Samaritan, a member of a despised ethnic group. Their religious practices were not pure; they probably smelled and wore funny clothes and spoke with an accent and had high crime rates, too. A Samaritan couldn’t be the man’s savior. A Samaritan wouldn’t know the “secret of life.”

For the original audience, it’s a startling twist to the story that the hero is a Samaritan. Think lower class, or illegal immigrant, or Muslim or whatever other group of people is most feared and demonized at the moment. But Jesus doesn’t leave any doubt that the Samaritan is one whose example we are to follow. He lingers in the details of how the Samaritan saved the man. He came near to him, he was moved with pity, he bandaged his wounds, he poured oil and wine on the wounds, he picked him up and put him on his own animal, he took him to shelter, he took care of him, he paid the price and promised more. For the Samaritan, “what’s mine is yours, and I’ll share it” is his attitude. He is a picture of mercy, of generosity, of compassion. He is a living illustration of what it means to love.

For this is the secret of life—to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. It is the secret of living now. “Do this and you will live,” says Jesus. Do as the Samaritan does, live by the motto “what’s mine is yours, and I’ll share it.” Give up your instinct for self-preservation, and you will live the life God desires, the life that really is life, the life that is eternal. It starts in the here and now.

There is another translation of the second great commandment which can deepen our understanding of its life-giving capabilities. Instead of “Love your neighbor as

yourself,” an alternative reading is “Love your neighbor because he or she is like you.” And this reading explains why Jesus’ story features a Samaritan.

For though the Jews of Jesus’ day thought of Samaritans as “others,” “foreigners,” “strangers,” deep in the Hebrew tradition existed the practice of hospitality to strangers. “For you were aliens in the land of Egypt,” the scriptures teach. Our neighbors are more like us than unlike us. Love your neighbor, for they are in the same boat as we are. They struggle to raise children, to feed their families, to care for their elderly. They laugh and tell jokes and they pray. They worry over the same things and catch the same diseases and share the same emotions. Like us, they walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Love your neighbor, for you and he and she walk the same earth, and have the same needs, and share the same future. No one is an island; our lives are intertwined with one another from birth to death and beyond. Love your neighbor—do this and you will live, and so will your neighbor, for your life and your neighbor’s life are tied to one another!

There is a true story which begins with a poor Scottish farmer who saved a young boy trapped in a bog, sinking in the muck to his death. The lad turned out to be the son of a nobleman, who chose to repay the farmer by providing the farmer’s son with an education equal to that of his own son. The poor farmer’s son went on to graduate from St. Mary’s Medical School in London, and became known in world history as the man who discovered penicillin, Alexander Fleming.

The son of the nobleman also did well in school, but later in life contracted pneumonia. Once again his life was in jeopardy, but what saved him? The penicillin discovered by the farmer’s son. His name is known in history, too—Winston Churchill.

Our lives are tied to one another. Love your neighbor as yourself. And love the Lord your God with everything that you are! It’s no secret—do this and you will live, now and forever!

Praise be to God!

Alternative reading of “as yourself” and story of Fleming and Churchill taken from “Must I Love That Neighbor?” by Glenn E. Ludwig, from the book Changing A Paradigm—or Two, found on www.sermonsuite.com.