

Devil's Bridge

Preached July 14, 2019

Luke 10:25-37

Devil's Bridge is one of the most popular hiking trails in all of Sedona. As is often the case, this trail gets its name from the destination to which it leads. At the endpoint of Devil's Bridge Trail lies a 50-foot-high natural stone arch called Devil's Bridge. Great numbers of people start out on Devil's Bridge Trail, but not all of them end up crossing Devil's Bridge itself. As the Devil's Bridge Trail nears the Devil's Bridge arch, the trail splits and goes in two different directions. The left leading branch of the trail takes you *under* Devil's Bridge, where you can view it from below. From that vantage point, Devil's Bridge looks frightfully high and unnervingly narrow. The very sight of it proves to be a deterrent to some hikers, who are content to turn around head back to the trailhead.

The other leg of the trail brings you to the foot of a steep, rocky ascent to the topside of Devil's Bridge. The physical demands of the climb are enough to discourage some others to abandon the journey. Those who push on to the end of the trail discover that the width of the bridge is *not quite so dangerously narrow* as it looks from below. But, at the same time, looking *down from that perspective* will stop anyone with a fear of heights in his or her tracks before they ever actually set a foot on Devil's Bridge.

Which all goes to say that even though Devil's Bridge is perfectly safe, people's perceptions of the risks involved are convincing enough to justify giving up.

You don't have to actually travel to Sedona, though, to test what your own response to Devil's Bridge would be. We all face spiritual Devil's Bridges every day of our lives. At least, that's what Jesus was saying when he told one of the most popular of all his parables--the Parable of the Good Samaritan. But to really understand *what* Jesus was saying in that parable we must first understand *why* he told it.

It all began when a lawyer confronted Jesus with a question. There's a lawyer's creed that says you never ask a question during a trial unless you already know what the answer will be. Now, this man was not a lawyer in the way we would define the word. He was an expert in religious law. In this case, the Law of Moses, or the Torah. But make no mistake, there *was* a trial taking place here. And what was on trial was Jesus' very credibility.

Luke says that the lawyer's motive was to *test* Jesus. He asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replied, "What is written in the Law?" *Jesus knew* that that the *lawyer knew* the answer to the question the lawyer was asking. The lawyer answered by quoting the scriptures that sum up the heart of all the laws and commandments, which are to instruct us in God's will for us: you shall love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind. And love your

neighbor as yourself. Jesus said, “Do what you have just described—follow that trail--and you will find the life you’re looking for.”

It sounds so simple when Jesus puts it that way, doesn’t it? Love God with all that you are, and love your neighbor the same way you love yourself. A simple, easy to follow trail to eternal life. Until you actually start on the journey and discover how much harder the reality is compared to the intention. And so, in a way, the lawyer speaks for all of us when, wanting to *justify himself*, he asked Jesus, “And who *is* my neighbor?”

What does it mean that the lawyer wanted to justify himself? And what does the impulse to justify himself have to do with defining who is, or is not, his neighbor? Usually, the need to justify oneself arises when we have failed to do something we were supposed to do. If I say I will be somewhere at a certain time and don’t show up on time, it doesn’t feel as bad if I can give a good reason for being late—like a traffic jam or a flat tire. Justifications make convenient loopholes for excusing our responsibility to a duty.

When the lawyer asked Jesus to define who and who didn’t count as his neighbor, what he was really looking for were loopholes regarding who he could get away with not loving as much as he loved himself and still not be disobeying God’s commandment. Which implies that there were people he failed to love as he loved himself; and so, felt compelled to justify that by rationalizing that they didn’t count as neighbors that he was legally required to love, anyways.

That’s the moment that prompted Jesus to tell the Parable of the Good Samaritan. In it, a man is beaten and robbed and left to die by the side of the road. The first two people who find him there are a priest and a Levite. Both are religious men who knew well what the Law had to say about loving your neighbor. The Levite and the priest were the sort of people that the lawyer could identify with. You would expect that they would help the man who had been robbed and beaten. But both men find a reason to *justify* crossing the road to avoid giving him assistance.

What’s even more shocking, is that the hero of the story—the one who doesn’t justify shirking his duty to show compassion—is a despised foreigner—a Samaritan! That lawyer must have choked on his words when forced to admit that the person in the story who demonstrated neighbor love was someone who did not fit the lawyer’s own definition of a neighbor.

But before we think too harshly of the lawyer, we might consider this: although we can feel good about the many times that we are Good Samaritans, we must also acknowledge that we also are capable of being like the priest and the Levite and the lawyer; justifying the limits we place around who does and does not qualify as a neighbor. We can be justifiers for excusing ourselves from loving certain people as much as we love ourselves.

Overcoming the obstacles to “loving your neighbor as you love yourself” is infinitely more challenging than getting over whatever deters people from following the trail all the way up and over Devil’s Bridge.

But, justifying only leads us to a different kind of devil's bridge. A bridge where we cross over from God's call for us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves; to a place of justifying the replacement of the "neighbor" label with other labels of exclusion like addict, alien, or Moslem.

It's instructive to know that the Greek words used in the parable for referring to the mercy and compassion extended by the Samaritan are, elsewhere in Luke's Gospel, only used to describe the mercy and compassion that God shows to us, or that Jesus showed to others. Which implies that loving our neighbors—ALL our neighbors—as we love ourselves is to be a part of something greater than our limited capacity to love, and can only be accomplished through a reliance on the divine love that we have ourselves received.

If you read this parable in the Message Bible the ending is worded a little differently. Instead of Jesus asking which of the three—the priest, the Levite or the Samaritan—*was* a neighbor to the man in the ditch; Jesus asks, "Which of the three *became* a neighbor" to him? That sounds like being neighbors is not always something that just happens, but something that we consciously choose to do, something we are constantly becoming, relying on God's help.

One way to avoid the devil's bridge of justifying our leaning towards showing less compassion to some than to others, is to ask ourselves two questions based on the Commandments to love God with all our being and love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

First, are we truly loving God with all our heart, mind, souls and strength if we don't speak up when any child of God anywhere is being treated cruelly or unjustly? Especially, when Jesus has told us that whatever we do or don't do to the least of God's children, we are doing to him?

And second, are we really loving our neighbor as we love ourselves, when we put our limits on who is our neighbor, where God has placed no limits? Are we loving our neighbor as ourselves when we are silent as some people are subjected to injustices that would outrage us if done to our literal next-door neighbor?

In our world that is presently so bitterly divided, let us pray that, God's love for us can be the bridge over which we *are ever becoming* better and more inclusive neighbors, to everyone.