

**Family Matters 2: COMMUNITY MATTERS**  
**Luke 10:25 (5/15/16—Graduate Recognition)**

Two Sundays ago, on Children's Day, we began a series of messages on "Family Matters." Last Sunday, on Mothers' Day, we talked about parents, and how this task that God has assigned to parents *really matters*. "Parenting Matters!"

Hopefully, graduates, you appreciate your parents already; but listen to this: don't be surprised if your appreciation for Mom and Dad grows even stronger as the years go by.

But today is all about graduation. So to get us started, I want us to talk about one of every graduate's favorite topics: "teachers and tests." I can tell you're all excited about that!

Our graduates are in the process of saying their goodbyes to some teachers because they've managed to pass enough tests for them to decide to let them out! We never doubted that you would, grads; but still, we're proud of you, and we congratulate you today.

I hate to have to break this to you, though, but there will be more teachers and tests in your future—whether or not you pursue higher education. Most of you know very well the Scripture passage I'm about to read—it may be one of your favorites, in fact—but just listen to what it talks about:

**"On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25)** Did you hear that? In this one verse, there's a teacher and...a test! And a student, too.

Jesus is the Teacher. Now, going to college means you trade in your teachers for... professors. Professors are like teachers on steroids! Just continue do your best—you'll get through it like most of the rest of us did.

Now, the student here is already a lawyer. Don't ever think your education is completed just because you've graduated. Here we have a lawyer who, to his credit, is still trying to learn; so he asks Jesus the question that students have always asked: "Teacher, what must I do to pass the test?"

Now, granted, this lawyer's talking about a really big test. He wants Jesus to give him some assurance that he'll score a passing grade with God, and thus graduate someday into eternal life!

Being a lawyer, he was probably looking for something very specific in Jesus' answer, hoping to hear such precise language there would be no way to misinterpret its intentions—even if this meant you had to be a lawyer to understand it.

But most of us know that's not what Jesus did at all. Instead, after a brief discussion about loving God with all your heart, and loving your neighbor as yourself, the lawyer, in good legal tradition, asked to have the term "neighbor" defined: "Who exactly (precisely, specifically) is my neighbor?"

Instead of giving the kind of clear definition the lawyer wanted, however, the Master Teacher told a parable. This well-known story begins: **"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead." (Luke 10:30)**

We all know this story. A priest passes by, then a Levite. Neither stops to help the man. Then, a Samaritan comes by. The lawyer knows HE'LL never stop—NOT a SAMARITAN--but he does.

So the lawyer's thinking that this no-good half-breed—which is how he saw Samaritans—he knew this low-life was only seeing if the robbers had left anything that he could scavenge for himself.

Instead, the Samaritan bandages the man's wounds, places him on his own donkey, and takes the wounded man to a place where he can receive proper care. He even pays all the medical bills!

Now, I think there are many things the Teacher wants his students to learn from this. As Christians, Jesus is our Teacher. The specific lesson I want us to focus on today is Jesus' sense of community. He uses the word "neighbor." He says that a neighbor is someone who's what?—someone who's willing to take care of us—just as, hopefully, we are willing to take care of them.

Of course, by most definitions, the injured man and the Good Samaritan were not neighbors at all—certainly not by any definition the lawyer would have found reasonable. But Jesus was

so “wide open” in His definition, it made it sound like ANYONE could be our neighbor—and that’s precisely the point (the lesson)!

Maybe the kind of community Jesus is describing here has yet to happen. Everywhere we turn, it seems that more barriers are being erected and our sense of community is being torn down. Are the teachings of Jesus lost on us today? Do they just go right over our heads...and detour around our hearts?

Those of you who are graduating this year are supposed to be the most connected generation ever—but can you help the rest of us connect with one another in ways Jesus intended—with compassion and fairness and love? How ironic if all this connectedness only leads to further division, alienation, and even intimidation.

One of the greatest challenges facing Christians today is how to rediscover community. We’ve got to see this need again from Jesus’ perspective. We dare not flunk out when it comes to being good neighbors.

This was written by someone who knew Jesus very well, his brother, James. For a time, he thought Jesus was crazy. Actually, it’s fairly common for one sibling to think this about another. Some of us know this from personal experience.

Jesus’ brother, James, once tried to talk Jesus out of what He was doing. This was early in Jesus’ ministry. But James later became a devout Christian and the leader of the church in Jerusalem.

Let’s listen to how James describes the kind of life that says that Jesus Christ is not only our teacher, but that we’ve actually learned something from Him—because it’s possible to sit through all the classes and pass all the tests and still not learn anything! Starting with verse 14 of James 2:

**<sup>14</sup>What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? <sup>15</sup>Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup>If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? <sup>17</sup>In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (James 2:14-17)**

Some things have to happen in communities, especially if it's a community like the church—a community founded upon faith in Jesus Christ. But I suppose this would also need to be true in any really good community—or state or nation, for that matter. It's just that a community of Christians should be better at this than any other—simply because of who our Teacher is!

Later in his book, James tells us more about making good communities happen. Listen:

**Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. <sup>16</sup>For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.**

**But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness. (Js. 3:13-18)**

In these two brief passages, James tells us about communities that please God. He tells us how the people in these communities take care of those in need.

He also tells us how they relate to everyone else with a kind of godly wisdom, which he describes as being 'pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.'

So when Jesus tries to impress upon the lawyer what it means to be a neighbor, this is the kind of stuff he emphasizes by telling the story of the Good Samaritan. And, friends, as our world keeps getting smaller, the importance Jesus' teachings keeps getting bigger.

Everybody knew that when Jesus told that Jewish lawyer that he should think of that despised Samaritan—the outsider, the alien--as being his "neighbor"... that the question changed from "Who is my neighbor?" to "Who in the world... isn't?"

This just may be your generations' big question, graduates. In a world where we increasingly struggle to see anyone who doesn't look like, talk like, believe like, or vote like us as our neighbor, you may be called upon to both see and treat these very different folks as your neighbors in order to survive.

Not that survival should be your primary motivation. I hope the reason you will see them and treat them as neighbors is because you genuinely desire to be true to Christ even while living in a world that seems to be forgetting everything He taught us.

If you want to help us rediscover how much community matters, you'll need to actually follow the teaching of Jesus. You'll need to go through the kind of radical transformation in your thinking that Jesus proposed to the lawyer, and that his brother James finally understood and wrote about.

Frederick Buechner, in one of his writings, talks about how we're all interconnected in this world. He likens humankind to **"an enormous spider web, so that if you touch it anywhere you set the whole thing trembling.... As we move around this world and as we act with kindness, perhaps, or with indifference, or with hostility, toward the people we meet, we too are setting the spider web atremble. The life I touch for good or ill will touch another life, and that in turn another, until who knows when the trembling stops or in what far place or time my touch will be felt."**  
(*The Hungering Dark*, pp.45-46)

By the way, Buechner wrote this book in the late 1960's, long before we had anything like a "world wide web"--which so greatly multiplies, for good or ill, our touches and the tremblings that result from them. Graduates, your generation will have to find ways to use all this technology for good purposes, for restoring our communities...instead of destroying them.

Maybe some of us are wondering what this has to do with families. Well, families don't exist in isolation. We're all part of the communities in which we live.

Our community impacts our family life—for better or worse—so communities matter! Jesus wouldn't have brought up this "good neighbor" business otherwise, nor would James have been inspired to share with us such practical guidelines for living together and relating to one another in communities.

**“Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.” (James 2:15)** James highlights the need; then he says we should either try to respond to the need in ways that are most helpful—and I know this gets complicated today—but we should at least try to respond or stop claiming to be Christian.

Communities of Christians answer the call to help—you’ve seen this, graduates, with Family Promise, Saturday Servants, your work with Habitat, the Wilmary, and other mission opportunities. I hope this church has set a good example for you in this regard—that’s certainly been our intention.

If enough of us would do this, maybe we could actually live in a community that reflects Christian values—maybe even in a nation and world that does so.

Increasingly, we are one big community. As followers of Christ, we’ve been assigned the task of bearing witness to the kind of community our Lord wants His world to be.

This will never come about through anyone’s political agendas or demonstrations of power—except, of course, the power of Christian love and witness, and what James calls “wisdom from heaven.” Talk about an “out of fashion” way to live, listen to this:

**“...the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness. (Js. 3:18)**

By the way, that word “righteousness” means “a right relationship with God and one another.” That’s Christian community. James learned this from Jesus, his Teacher.

Jesus’ message was all about reconciliation—being peacemakers--overcoming the conflicts between us and God *and* the conflicts between us and one another. Neither problem is solved... until both problems are solved (Jesus: ‘love God and love your neighbor’).

So graduates, you’ll have your hands full if you seek to be part of the solution, if you want to be restorers of community instead of joining forces with those who make the divisions worse. And like the rest of us, you’ll need to choose your teachers carefully.

The professors you have in the future may or may not help you with this. I wouldn't count on too many leaders of industry or finance either. If a politician claims he or she is going to bring us all together, you should probably be skeptical of that as well.

If, on the other hand, you really want to be part of making a difference in this world, if you have a desire to restore a sense of community to our lives, you'll need to let Jesus be your Teacher—and be courageous enough to call into question what others are pushing—even in Jesus' name--if you know it doesn't jive with Jesus' teachings.

Now, if you do this—if you try to live Jesus' way--expect people to test you—just like they did Jesus. They did their worst to Jesus (the cross), but He stayed true to what He came here to do. Now it's our great privilege to know Him as Savior and Lord, and as His followers to resist those who seek to label us, divide us and destroy our sense of community.

Our calling is to be ministers of reconciliation, restorers of community, for Christ's sake—and for the sake of our families, and our world! God bless you, graduates. Keep the faith! And through your lives, always seek to bring honor to Christ!