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## The Devil is in the Definitions

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### **Text: Luke 10:25-37**

In the Gospel reading today, what was the lawyer doing when he stood up to test Jesus? I believe that what he was doing was using *definitions* to try to suck the importance right out of Jesus' words.

Jesus had said something very simple and very powerful. Actually, it wasn't Jesus; it was the lawyer himself who had been tricked by Jesus into providing the answer as to what a believer must do, in his words, "to inherit eternal life." It's straightforward and common sense. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself." "You are right," said Jesus to the lawyer. "Do this and you shall live." The incident could have ended there. But it didn't.

We are to love our Creator, and love every single one of God's creations. That, it should be noted, is what Jesus says is the summary of every other law and commandment in the whole Bible. We could post that on the back wall here at Christ the Redeemer and never have to talk about the essence of biblical teaching ever again, because it's all there. Love. Love God. Love one another as ourselves. Love. Love. Love.

But then comes the lawyer. And how does he try to suck the power out of love? Here we have to pay very close attention. The lawyer tries to limit God's love *by restricting who our neighbour should be*.

When that horrible thing happened for the first time in Iraq, the videotaped beheading of a young American in May 2004, the exact same kind of rationalizations as here in the Gospel story were used to justify it. Instead of a human name – *Berg* – the person who was so brutally murdered was simply called "the infidel." Why was his name taken away from him? Because as long as people have personal names, we can identify with them. But as soon as they lose their names and become categories, then we are not as likely to feel with them, or, as the Bible commands, to love them.

So also the prisoners in the Baghdad prison who are not called “Ali” or “Mohammed” or whatever their names are, but are referred to as “suspected terrorists.”

Those civilians hit by bombs on the one side or car bombs and suicide bombers on the other are not called mothers and fathers and children, but “collateral damage” or “infidel” or “collaborators.” It’s hard to believe that these terms, especially “collateral damage,” can ever refer to people.

In almost every case that I can think of where there is some kind of really nasty, horrible treatment of one group by another, it is preceded by a definition of that other group which in some way takes away their humanity. Thus Hitler called German citizens who practiced another religion “dirty Jews,” or the Russians “animals.” Even in the last federal election the former Liberal MP for our riding apologized when one of her aides called the Bloc Quebecois candidate who won so handily a name for the fact that he is black. Skin colour had nothing to do with the win. But it’s easy to focus on that rather than the real issues. Because to define someone primarily for his/her difference is not to have to see our own responsibilities.

Who is my neighbour? The lawyer’s question is another slogan that should be posted at the back of the church so that we can see it every Sunday. Because the way Jesus defines it showed the lawyer, and should show us, that *everyone* who is in need is our neighbour. There is no place in the Gospel message for definitions that restrict access to love.

*There once was a man going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, Jesus said, and he fell into the hands of robbers. A man. Doesn’t say whether he’s high-class or low-class, educated or not, crippled, healthy, blind, disabled, a Jew, an Egyptian, a Greek, an immigrant, a salesman, or a metal worker; whether he liked classical music or heavy metal, whether he was pierced or tattooed or blond or brown-haired or brown-skinned or unemployed or rich or whatever. Jesus says, a man. A human being. In other words, just by virtue of his being a human being, we should care what happens to him. And we do. As the robbers strip him, beat him, and leave him half-dead, we feel terrible for this man. He didn’t ask for that.*

*Now by chance, Jesus goes on, a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. My guess is that the reason the priest passed by on the other side was that he let*

a *definition* replace what was right there in front of his eyes: another human being. Instead of another person, the priest saw a definition of “unclean,” for if he touched the wounded man, the Scriptures told him that he the priest would become unclean and would lose the right to perform his duties quickly and easily in the Temple.

*So likewise a Levite*, Jesus says, *when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side*. The Levite, who would probably have been an assistant to the priests in the Temple, also chooses not to see the blood as human blood and the suffering as human suffering. He too see a definition: “victim” perhaps, or “trouble” or “danger” or, worst of all, and again because of the injunctions about purity in the Scripture, “hassle.”

I was once told by a career soldier who had been in Vietnam that this whole business of defining other people as labels was very much a part of his training. We were taught precisely *not* to think about individuals and their needs, he said to me one day. The ability to see other people as human beings was drummed out of us. We were told they were “Commys” or “Dirty Vietcongs” or “targets;” we were not *allowed* to think of the people we were shelling as real people. If we had, the whole thing would have been up.

*But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity*. We could say that means that whenever there is a need we are supposed to help out. And that is certainly part of what Jesus was teaching. But Jesus was telling this story to the *lawyer*, remember? Jesus was telling this good, fine, upright, morally justified lawyer that the one person who did right was someone in whose company the lawyer would never in real life ever be caught – an outcast, dirty, sinful Samaritan. Which raises the question: Who are the outcasts in our society now?

Like the lawyer, we stand up and ask Jesus, “What must we do to act as disciples and as children of God?” And Jesus, wanting to hear it out of our own mouths, says, “What do you think?” And if we listen to the Bible we too can say, “Love God, and love our neighbours as ourselves.” And that should be enough.

But are we going to be like the lawyer? He couldn’t accept his own answer. Why not? Because his need to justify himself was stronger than his desire to follow Jesus’ example of love. If our need to justify our own prejudgments is stronger than our need to love, we too will question Jesus. Who is my neighbour? Does that include

Moslems and people of other faiths? Are they our neighbour? Does that include Haitians who speak a different language and are from a different culture? Does that include people with different ideas, more conservative or more liberal, than ourselves? And very much to the point of recent discussions in our Church, does that include gays and lesbians? Are they people with names, or just categories and definitions?

The source of our faith and doctrine, the Bible, talks about what is clean and unclean, sinful and not sinful, and also talks about the commandment to love all as our neighbour. When it comes to people who are often just categories to us, which part of the Bible will we listen to: The clean and unclean part, which the priest and the Levite certainly knew? Or the great commandment?

Once there was a lawyer who asked Jesus a simple question and got a simple answer: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” “What do the Scriptures say?” “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbour just as much as you love yourself.”

And Jesus says, “Well answered, Christ the Redeemer Lutheran Church. Do this and you shall live.” Amen!