

My theology professor in seminary had a ritual for beginning each class. He would walk solemnly to the front of the room, pray a Prayer for Guidance from the Book of Common Prayer, and then pronounce in his deep, aristocratic voice, "It is a privilege to do theology."

Those who have the luxury of time and energy to spend contemplating God are truly privileged. So many in our world, by necessity, are caught up with worry about feeding their children, finding work, making ends meet... Having time in one's schedule and having the emotional energy to meet with others at church to study, pray and worship together is an enormous privilege that many in our world are simply do not possess. We have options as to which creed (if any) we publicly profess, our lives are not at risk if we do not adhere to the mandates of a state religion, and we get to pick and choose which flavor of which faith tradition we ascribe to and have opinions about. We are extremely fortunate to be able to debate the finer points of what we believe, why we believe it, and how we ought to go about living these beliefs. Yes, indeed, it is a privilege to do theology!

And this lawyer is one of the elite privileged few in his day. He was an expert on the Law and the Prophets. And he was at the top of his game! As evidenced by his prompt and precise response to Jesus' question about what was written in the Law, it is clear that he knew a lot. Here (in his mind). But not so much here (in his heart.)

But let me back up a bit.

Last week we heard the first part of this chapter in Luke's Gospel about Jesus sending out 70 faithful followers to spread the Good News. And we heard Father Furman preach about how these followers got up off the bench and got into the game. Out they went and (a few verses later) back they came. A debriefing session ensued in which the 70 reported with joy about all they did. And Jesus responds, in his own gentle way, 'it's not about what you did, God did all that.'

The end of this debriefing session is where we pick back up with our Gospel reading this morning. An expert in religious law, one of the faithful 70 whom Jesus had sent out ahead of him, this lawyer helped healed the sick, cast out demons, and shared the message of Jesus. He had an amazing experience on his mission trip and wants to sustain this spiritual high. He now stands up and asks his question, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” In other words, what’s the meaning behind all this; how can I have this life you talk about, this kingdom of God you sent us out to proclaim; how can I get me some of that?

Who of us hasn’t wondered that very question? We hear about the pearly gates, the streets of gold. We think about reuniting with our childhood pets, once again enjoying grandma’s cookies, and listening to heavenly choirs of angels. We long for a place where no one hungers, no tears need wiping because none are shed. And we want some of that.

And so we ask, just like this expert who knows nearly everything there is to know about religion, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

What must I **do**?

When the ways we manifest our beliefs become the means to a self-serving end, we stop making God the center of our lives. Living our faith morphs into doing our faith.

Theology, that privileged endeavor, is not about us. Faith is a blessed endeavor. It, too, ought always begin and end with God.

The lawyer asks, ‘what must I do?’ and ‘who is my neighbor?’ As though he (or anyone else for that matter) can ‘do’ faith, and as if he is the center of the community and others are understood only in relation to him. These are important distinctions that the parable plays out later in their conversation.

Jesus asks this Scriptural expert what the Law and Prophets say. And the lawyer’s own words are powerful, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus affirms that this is the right answer to the man’s question ~ yes, do this, and you will live. (Not live forever, but **live**.) But the lawyer still doesn’t

understand what that means. And because he still doesn't get it, he hears his own Summary of the Law as a checklist.

However, loving God and neighbor are not a checklist of to-dos, they are a way of life. And this way of life is not focused on oneself ~ it is fixed on God. The self-centeredness of his perspective persists in his next question: who, then, is my neighbor ~ as though neighborliness is an action item, a 'one and done.'

Jesus gives this expert a lesson in theology by telling the parable that we are all probably very familiar with, which can be read as Jesus' gentle way of saying, "Dude! For the love of God, it ain't all about you!" No, Jesus is far above discouraging one of his 70 whom he called off the bench and sent forth to proclaim his message. Rather, Jesus pushes the lawyer to consider a broader perspective.

Jesus concludes his parable and then presents another twist on the man's question in which the entire dynamic shifts. The presenting question, "who is my neighbor?" is re-asked by Jesus as "who was acting as a neighbor?" and it's implied follow-up question, "who are you behaving as a neighbor toward?" Neighborliness, Jesus suggests, is neither a bullet point on a day's agenda, nor is it a task that could be delegated and become someone else's responsibility.

Two of the biggest lessons we can glean from this passage are (1) theology always begins with God. God is not defined by us or understood in relation to us, but *we* are defined by God and can understand ourselves only in relation to God. And (2) theology and faith are not the same thing. Knowing about God, knowing about what the Scriptures say or what the great thinkers have concluded about all things Holy is not the same as living a way of life that seeks to bring near the Kingdom of God.

Faith, like theology, always begins with God – and it seeks to attend to the intentions of God, not the individual. I think this is what Jesus is trying to explain – to the lawyer and the other 69 recently returned evangelists, and to his disciples who are gathered nearby.

Humans have an amazing capacity to get in our own way. We sabotage our own best efforts. I think most of us who hunger and thirst for God slip into the temptation to study the Bible, read books, take pilgrimages, or faithfully attend

prayer group ... and forget that the point is to live our faith. Those activities are certainly have their place, but they can become replacements for a dynamic relationship with God when we get caught up in the 'doing' of our faith tradition and forget the living of our faith.

It is a privilege to do theology. It is an even greater privilege to live our faith.

When our study or religious practices interfere with our ability to be in relationship with God, it no longer glorifies the One who is at the center of it all. The unfolding mystery of God's creative act "ain't about us." It's about God's activity in creation, of which we are only a small part. Our faith journey is not about what we do to inherit eternal life. If that is our goal, we have missed the point. Our faith journey is about glorifying the One who created all that is. When God is the fulcrum of our human experience, when we realize that we are defined not by what we know or by what we do, but by the love God has for each of us, *then* we approach the Kingdom of God. That whole eternal life thing? That's just a fringe benefit.

I'll close with that prayer I mentioned that my theology professor used to bring class. It's a Prayer for Guidance that is in the back of our prayer book.

Let us pray:

Direct us, O Lord, in all our doings with *thy* most gracious favor, and further us with *thy* continual help; that in all our works begun, continued, and ended in *thee*, we may glorify *thy* holy Name, and finally, by *thy* mercy, obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.* (BCP 832)