

The Lutheran Church of the Atonement
Florissant, Missouri
Proper 10 -- Year C
July 9-10, 2022
Deuteronomy 30:9-14; Colossians 1:1-14
St. Luke 10:25-37

"What is the good life?" I am grateful that, in an educational world almost obsessed with so-called STEM studies, there are still a few university programs -- like the Christ College program at Valparaiso -- that still require students to grapple with this important question. "What is the good life?" For I fear that, unless a person really does grapple with that question, consciously and intentionally, a person will automatically revert to the "default" answer, namely, the life lived for oneself.

"What is the good life?" This is the question asked by the lawyer in today's Gospel Lesson. Ignore the question printed in your bulletin and in virtually every Bible printed over the past 500 years. For that question is not a question that any devout Jew of Jesus's day -- and certainly not any devout Jewish scholar of Jesus's day -- would even think to ask. And, as is always the case, in order to understand the answer, we must first understand the question. For, sadly, because we have mistranslated the question, we have misunderstood Jesus's answer, and, in so doing, have turned the parable of the Good Samaritan into a simple morality play -- teaching important lessons, to be sure, about overcoming ethnic prejudices and about helping those in distress, but perhaps missing the larger message. But, this is what can happen when we pull familiar stories out of their larger context, both their cultural context and their literary context. For, if we begin with our own cultural context and our own suppositions, we are almost certain to mis-hear what is being said, even to mistranslate what is being said. Allow me a moment to explain.

The lawyer's question -- as printed in your bulletin

-- is "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" but, a far better translation of the original Greek might be "What must I do to claim my share of the life of the age?" by which the lawyer means "What must I do to claim my share of the life of the age-to-come? What must I do to claim my share of the coming age when God reigns?" You see, most of the Judaism of Jesus's day divided all of world history into two great eras or epochs or ages: "this present age" -- Paul calls it "this present evil age" -- and the coming age, the age when YHWH, Israel's God, will return and will restore the world to its initial created goodness. This was the Promise that God's people found in the Scriptures. This will be the age of the Kingdom, the age when God reigns, the age of God's perfect Shalom. And, in Jesus's day, the shorthand for that coming era was "the age." This would be the age, if you will, of "the good life." Just as at creation, when God looked out and saw that all He had made was "good," so now, God would look out at all that He had redeemed and restored and declare that it was "good."

That surely had to be that devout Jewish lawyer's understanding and expectation, that when this present evil age was ended, YHWH, Israel's God, would return, would restore God's creation, and would usher in the coming age, the age of God's Kingdom, God's Shalom. But now something totally unexpected had happened. Jesus of Nazareth had entered the scene, both announcing the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God and, by means of powerful and symbolic actions, doing what only YHWH, Israel's God, could do, making evident that, in His person, YHWH's long-awaited return was coming to pass -- albeit in a way that no-one had anticipated. In other words, God's future was breaking into the present -- in and through the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

So...if that's the cultural (or theological) context, what is the literary context? Well, Luke begins today's

reading with "Just then,..." clearly connecting this account with what has immediately just gone on before. So, what had just happened? (You heard this in last week's Gospel reading.) Jesus had sent out 70 of His followers both to announce the in-breaking of God's Kingdom, i.e., the coming age, and to enact it, principally by curing the sick and driving out demons, restoring people to wholeness. And, Luke tells us that "the 70 returned with joy," telling stories of the extraordinary things that God had done through them. Jesus says that He's seen Satan fall like a flash of lightning, signaling that the ultimate power of evil has been broken. He tells the 70 that the great prophets and kings of Israel had longed to see these signs of the Kingdom breaking into God's world and had never seen them. Even these great heroes of faith had never seen what the 70 had been privileged to be part of -- God's future, breaking into the present!

"Just then,..." Luke tells us, "Just then,..." this devout Jewish scholar, who has clearly overheard all of this, wants to get in on the action. "What must I do to claim my share of the life of the age?...What should I do to experience the life of the Kingdom where God reigns?" In other words, "How can I live this good life?"

Now, you'll note that this is not how this lawyer/scholar's question is generally translated or understood in our cultural context. The question, as translated in your bulletin, leads most folks in our cultural context to think that he's asking about going to heaven when he dies. But, as I said earlier, no devout Jewish scholar of Jesus's day would even think to ask that. Better, the hope of Jesus's contemporaries and of His followers focused on "the Resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." But, now, that glorious future was, in Jesus, breaking into the present. Now, through the power of God's Spirit, people -- like those 70 -- were

already living the life of the age to come. So, this lawyer could not help but ask, "How can I live that life in the here and now?" In other words, "How can I live the life of God's future even now in the midst of the evil of this present age? "How can I live the good life?" Indeed, "what is the good life?"

Which, you will note, is exactly the question Jesus is answering, both by telling us this much-loved story and by continuing on to Jerusalem where -- like that Samaritan - He will do for us what we could not do to rescue ourselves. Amen