

*A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany, an Episcopal Church in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on Sunday, 11 July 2010, based upon the parable of the Good Samaritan, Proper 10 in lectionary year C. To God be the glory.*

Betsy Bishop, the wife of our former rector Jack Bishop, and a friend to many of us, tells the story of Larry Berry. It was the late 1980s. Larry Berry was the director of music here, and Jack Bishop was the soon-to-be-retired rector. It was also obvious to some, and eventually known by all, that Larry Berry was dying of AIDS. You remember the 80s. There was terrible fear about contracting the virus, and awful stigma toward those who had it. Nonetheless, one by one people in the choir began to care for Larry, going to his apartment in Boston, helping him get around, and literally touching one who was unclean.

At one point, near the end, Larry and Betsy were sitting together here in church. I think it might have been Jack's last Sunday as rector. Larry turned to Betsy and said, "I think I might die, right now." Betsy said, "that's okay. So be it. This is a good time." Basically she was giving permission for Larry to claim eternal life right there on the spot. Larry didn't die that day, but he did soon afterwards.

Today's gospel begins with a lawyer asking Jesus this question, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Do you ever ask that question? I'm sure you don't in polite circles, at a dinner party, or at summer punch in the Cloister Garden. But here's the deal: as awkward as it is, the question gets all the time. It's just that we phrase it differently. We ask it this way: *What must I do to make more money? What must I do to find a partner? What must I do to have a better sex life, a better job, or a happier life? Will I have enough? What must I do to have good health?*

The answer to all those questions is Jesus' answer to the lawyer. Bear in mind that the lawyer wasn't being self-righteous. In fact, he's quite respectful of Jesus. He calls him "teacher" and they're engaging in a discussion about the Law, the Torah, something both valued a great deal. Jesus responds plainly, using words from their Scripture, when he says, "You shall 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." And then Jesus adds, "Do this and you will live." To love God to the fullest and to know and follow Jesus is eternal life.

What must we do to inherit eternal life? Eternal life acknowledges that we're more than machines, more than our work, more than our beliefs, more than our pocket books, more than our clubs—eternal life acknowledges that a life lived for God and at the service of others is a life worth living. And what Betsy Bishop was saying to Larry Berry that day in this church is that it's also a life worth dying for. Eternal life is accepting God's invitation to give this life all that we have, and to live each day oriented towards God.

There's a Chinese proverb that goes something like this: "One who asks a question remains a fool for five minutes; one who does not ask a question remains a fool for life." The story which Jesus tells, the beloved parable of the Good Samaritan, is told only in Luke, and among its best characteristics is that it's full of questions, including I think God's question to us.

It takes spiritual maturity to ask the right questions, and maybe even more spiritual maturity to live with the questions. Imagine your living the question of what it means to inherit eternal life? Imagine living your way into knowing who your neighbor is, and your way into Christ's words, "Go and do likewise." Notice how the question never gets asked about who is my God? When we fail to live into our questions, we fail to know God. When we fail to remember that God is not here to answer our questions, but to question our answers, we miss a golden opportunity to inherit eternal life.

What must we do to inherit eternal life? Do this and you will live, go and do likewise. God calls us to live by choosing to love, choosing to see, and choosing to pay attention to the questions. But pay attention to the verbs as well. Living and loving, are action verbs. The man on the way to Jericho was stripped, beaten and left half dead. The Samaritan saw him, went to him, bandaged his wounds, put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him, even into the next day.

Some of you did all this for Larry Berry over two decades ago. Others of you are doing it at St. Luke/San Lucas in Chelsea, or at St. Stephen in the South End, or at El Hogar, or by taking the Sacrament to one who can't be here. Some of you are trying to figure out how to inherit eternal life, and you've come here to seek help in discovering the path. So I say to all of you "thank you" and I say "you are welcome"--and I say those statements to myself too.

I'll close with something a wise mentor once said to me and a group of pupils. It was our first day as hospital chaplain interns. It's applicable to all of us. "Live the questions. Know that God is in the ditch, and that you're in the ditch, and that you can be the Good Samaritan. Go and do likewise."