My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God of our minds, hearts, bodies, and spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

The scribe in this story answers correctly what must be done to inherit eternal life, right? What did Jesus say? Jesus queries him on what Moses’ law says. Which is what? What was the scribe’s answer? <Love the Lord with all heart, mind, soul, spirit, and Love your neighbor>

Jesus says yes, do this and you will live. But the scribe goes further and asks to establish himself, and so he asks what? Who is my neighbor?

Todays scripture is one that we were all taught in Church school, or if not, at least we have heard of it. But while we know the text of the story, we don’t apprehend precisely how this is perceived by Jesus’ hearers. If ever there was radical grace, this story demonstrates it. And yes, it gives a very direct answer to the question not just for those with ears that can hear and eyes that can see that God’s love the truth is revealed. This is described as a scene, not a parable or a story, but we can imagine that this actually happened it’s so vivid.

So there’s a couple of things worth noting. First of all, the ones who are the most educated and think that they are the most dedicated followers of God are thrust on the other side of the road. And it’s interesting to note that we somehow make excuses for them with our assumptions about their positions and what they would have known driving what they did. The most common dodge we afford them is that they assume the badly beaten man is dead and as such it would be unclean, and maybe this was forbidden on certain days of the week. Except for the fact that if either of them did find a corpse, they had a duty to bury it. And if the man was badly hurt, they had a duty to…..???

And that’s where this gets juicy, doesn’t it? Because in storytelling convention, heck, even in today’s world, if I were to tell you, “A priest, a Levite, and another guy walk into a bar…” what would you expect? The priest and the Levite do one thing the same, and the third guy breaks the rules and does something totally outrageous, right?

Well, it was the same thing back in the ancient world of Jesus’ time; some things really, truly, haven’t changed in 2,000 years, in this case how we set up the unexpected. But now imagine that this third guy is not an ordinary guy but a Samaritan, Israel’s hated and despised peoples from the fallen kingdom to the north of Jerusalem. Jesus uses this image to demonstrate his point, that even someone who doesn’t know the rules of being a good neighbor ends up knowing the rules of being a good neighbor. I’ll show you what we mean.

Loving our neighbor means doing the outrageous thing sometimes, the unexpected thing, being the person who doesn’t pay attention to anything but what’s in front of them. Let’s look at the helper and what happens in terms of actions:

* He came near (the priest and Levite kept their distance by crossing the road).
* He saw (the priest and Levite crossed the road and didn’t even get close enough to really see).
* He was moved with pity (emotional engagement with the person)
* He went to him (maybe even uncomfortably around blood and broken bones)
* He bandaged his wounds (provided basic care and first aid to stop the bleeding)
* Poured oil and wine (pouring wine on the wound would cleanse it before the days of Bactine and hydrogen peroxide; the oil would keep it soft)
* Put the wounded man on his donkey (would we load a person into our car like this?)
* Brought him to an inn (a place of comfort, dry, and comfortable conditions)
* Took care of him (looking after him in those first few hours after injury)
* Took two days wages and gave them to the innkeeper (this is a lot of money even today)
* Said for the innkeeper to take care of him no matter what.

There’s a lot of action verbs here. Eleven, actually. And it demonstrates the point that the compassion which Jesus is talking about is not a matter of feeling, but of action. There’s an old Arab proverb that sums it up: “To have a good neighbor, you must be one.” (repeat this). Neighbors are defined actively, not passively. And Jesus has turned the issue from the boundaries on its head, of passively being a neighbor into the essential active and helping nature of neighborliness. Today we might say he re-framed the phrase from “See something, say something”, to “See something, DO something.”

Actions speak louder than words. And we all seek to do the positive thing, right? Because there are negative actions which undermine our sense of community, like habitual grumbling about how overworked we happen to be. Or how we do enough and others need to step up to the plate, even when the need is clear that we can help.

But to foster hope and community building—those things that people do together to address human needs—we engage our spiritual practices to help us through. Prayer. Singing. Service. And doing the things that small churches do to keep faithful to this story and our mission as TCC. Three small, but big things, really:

* Paying attention to keeping promises, not excuses
* Telling the truth, not engaging in deception
* Expressing gratitude, not habitual grumbling

When we are in a right frame of mind and gratitude, it’s a little easier to give of ourselves as servants of God, and not engage in the self-pitying exercises of not having any time to do anything more for anyone else.

There’s more to say about this, but I’ve listened to you in my 5 years here, so I won’t say any more this week but pick it up next time we’re together, and save you from what will be more than 20 minutes of important insights into God’s grace. So here’s my final thoughts for now to ponder this week as we journey, and to set ourselves up for the conclusion of our Neighbor journey.

Johnathan Edwards, still the UCC’s greatest theologian even though he died 250 years ago, thought deeply about active and passive religion in his “Treatise Concerning Religious Affections”. It’s a mere 232 pages, for me it was a good bedtime book that took some time to contemplate since I fell asleep only after a few pages of archaic colonial English grammatical structures. But the twelfth of these Religious affections sums it thusly:

“Religious Affections are intensely practical in everyday life. They change lives and produce practical results. Christian practice is much more to be preferred as evidence of salvation than sudden conversion, mystical enlightenment, or the mere experience of emotional comfort that begins and ends with contemplation”. (repeat that). Our school students might know this kind of thinking when the teacher asks, “don’t just tell me you know what the answer is; show me how you got there so I can see it, too.”

We are, even in 1746 when this was published, exhorted to be a people of action. And action, not thought, helps neighbors most and best. Thanks be to God, Amen.