

Scripture: Luke 10:25–37

Sermon: The Man Who Fell Among Robbers / translated by Melody Ouk

***A Neighbor in Anguish**

This is a story about someone I know. Their life was incredibly arduous: a family member was critically ill and various other family hardships had struck all at once. They told me that what helped them endure those times was the podcast of a famous Buddhist monk. By listening to the monk's "immediate Q&A" sessions, where the monk answered questions posed by the public, they realized that many others were also navigating difficult lives. They came to understand that they were not alone in their suffering. It struck me that, for them, that monk had become a precious neighbor. There are so many people in this world who are groaning in anguish. Among them are those whose lives are in immediate peril without urgent help. The man who fell among robbers in today's passage is one such person. He was attacked by robbers while traveling down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The use of the plural "robbers" suggests that a gang of them had ambushed him. English translations describe him as "leaving him half dead." To be "half dead" signifies a desperate state requiring immediate assistance. Without urgent intervention, he faced certain death. He lay sprawled by the roadside slowly dying, either groaning in agony or lacking even the strength to groan. How people respond to a neighbor in such a dire situation forms the core of this story. This is a parable that Jesus told to an expert in the law.

*** Teacher of the Law**

A teacher of the law is someone with a profound understanding of the entire Law. In today's terms, one might compare him to an Old Testament professor at Princeton Theological Seminary. He approaches the Lord with questions, yet his motives are impure; he seeks to challenge Jesus regarding the ultimate human question: eternal life. However, Jesus proves to be a step ahead of him. When asked how to obtain eternal life, Jesus counters by asking what is written in the Law. The man emphatically demonstrates to Jesus that he grasps the Law's core tenets: loving God and loving one's neighbor. His answer, though simple, strikes right to the heart of the matter. Jesus's response is concise and clear: "Do this and you will live." In truth, we are well aware of the importance of these commandments. Yet, despite knowing them, we often choose to ignore them. This is because living according to God's will can disrupt our peace and comfort. Loving a neighbor requires us to accept hardship and effort. Helping a neighbor who is groaning in distress might put us at risk. It may require opening our wallets—not to mention the necessity of giving our time. It complicates our lives. Consequently, we try to relegate these matters to the realm of theology; we treat "loving God and loving one's neighbor" as abstract theological concepts rather than practical realities of our own lives. This explains why so many people study the Bible diligently yet fail to see their lives transformed. The command to "do this" is simple and straightforward, yet putting it into practice is incredibly difficult.

***Who became a neighbor to the man who fell among robbers?**

It seems the expert in the law fell into the very trap he had set with his own question. Consequently, he chose to set aside Jesus's instruction to "do likewise" and instead posed a new theological question, an apparent attempt to sidestep the crisis with a fresh inquiry. The Parable of the Good Samaritan is Jesus's response to his question: "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus presents a neighbor in dire distress and introduces three individuals who react to him in different ways. Jesus shifted the focus from "Who is my neighbor?" to "Who became a neighbor to the man who fell among robbers?" A change in the question inevitably leads to a change in the answer. Jesus transformed the question "Who can

be a neighbor to me?" into "To whom can I be a neighbor?" In Jesus's parable, a neighbor is someone who is in desperate, immediate need of help—someone who can barely stand on their own and whose very life is in peril without assistance. The expert in the law answers Jesus's question—"Who became his neighbor?"—by saying, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus's reply is once again concise: "Go and do likewise." It is a call not to become preoccupied with theological questions, but to put into practice what one believes and knows.

We know very well who showed mercy. Three people encountered the victim who had been robbed and left by the roadside: a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan. While the priest and the Levite simply passed by, the Samaritan was different. He exerted himself physically, sweating and laboring, to care for the man. He did not stop there. He opened his purse. He even altered his travel plans to ensure the man was looked after. The two figures contrasted with the Samaritan in this parable, the priest and the Levite, were religious leaders. They belonged to the same circle as the expert in the law and were well-versed in the law themselves. Yet, they failed to practice its core commandment. Although they possessed extensive knowledge from their study of the Scriptures, they were unwilling to put in the effort required to show mercy.

*Inheriting Eternal Life

Do you recall the initial question posed by the expert in the law that prompted this parable? It was, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" While Korean translations often use the word "obtain," the original Greek employs a verb meaning "to inherit." A literal translation would be, "How can I inherit eternal life?" English translations preserve this original nuance by using the word "inherit." In the Old Testament tradition, eternal life was understood as entering into the covenant community. Psalm 133 beautifully depicts this community of eternal life. The psalm sings of how brothers dwelling together in unity represents both a blessing from God and eternal life itself. Therefore, the Jewish people regarded becoming children of Abraham as synonymous with eternal life. After all, inheritance is a privilege reserved for children, isn't it? By becoming Abraham's children and entering his covenant community, one enjoys the blessing of eternal life. Within this community, the wealthy cannot simply fill their own bellies while ignoring the poor; it is a community bound by mutual responsibility and solidarity. That is why Jesus says, "Do likewise." He is saying, "You, too, must live like the Samaritan, adjusting your busy travel schedule and willingly 'wasting' your money and time to help the victim of the robbers. That is how you inherit eternal life." Inheriting eternal life is granted to those who have made the voluntary practice of doing good an integral part of their character. I once mentioned this while preaching on the Gospel of John: eternal life is that which holds value even in heaven, a life worth enduring forever. To inherit eternal life means to live out a life that possesses enduring, eternal value. It is here and now that we begin to live the life of heaven. What kind of place is heaven? It is a place where people gather who are honest, so deeply habituated to goodness that they would not take a penny of another's money even without any oversight, people free from greed, people eager to give, and people filled with overflowing love. Thus, heaven is a place filled with love. It is a place characterized by a profound spirit of spontaneity. Why is there such spontaneity? Because, day after day, we nail our sinful nature to the cross and engage in this arduous struggle. God invites us to live this life of highly spontaneous mercy, to "do likewise", starting right here.

* The Earth, Victim of Robbers

We are currently observing the Season of Creation. In this biblical context, "neighbor" fundamentally refers to a person created in God's image. However, if we stretch our imagination, our groaning neighbor can also be seen as our planet Earth and the non-human creatures living upon it. Creation is groaning everywhere. Due to human greed and exploitation, the Earth has become a victim, like a traveler set upon by robbers. This planet Earth, which God once declared so beautiful, is not merely groaning; it is dying. The phrase "God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:25) speaks to the beauty of the created world, but it also serves as a challenge for us to live in harmony with God's heart. It is a call to live while sensing God's presence in all things that exist in the world. In Romans 8:19, Paul states that creation groans and waits for the children of God to be revealed. People have long thought that protecting and preserving creation was unrelated to faith. In our focus on the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, we have forgotten God the Father, the Creator. After creating this world, God appointed humanity as its stewards. Although we have the duty and responsibility to care for and look after the world on God's behalf, we have instead ruined it. Human greed has driven creation into suffering. Humans, the leaders of the created order, have turned into robbers, destroying the Earth's ecosystem. German eco-theologian Franz Alt observes: "The Earth, as a living organism, has identified the cause of the disease threatening its ecosystem: humans filled with greed. And so, the Earth has begun to kill those humans." Earth is writhing in agony, struggling to spew humanity out from the planet; the climate crisis is one manifestation of this desperate struggle.

This tragedy began with the advent of human industrialization and the use of fossil fuels. Burning fossil fuels releases carbon dioxide, and excessive emissions have driven up global temperatures. In a sense, the Earth is running a fever, and it is also burning with rage at humanity. The surge in carbon dioxide has acidified the oceans and increased coral reef die-offs, disrupting marine ecosystems. Melting glaciers have caused sea levels to rise and altered ocean currents, triggering climate change. Climate disasters, including torrential rains, droughts, extreme cold, and scorching heat, are battering regions across the globe. The fear of infectious disease did not end with the COVID-19 pandemic. Although COVID-19 swept the world and claimed countless lives, we seem to have failed to reflect deeply on the situation. Species are vanishing at an alarming rate, 40,000 types of flora and fauna go extinct annually, and reports predict that 50% of all species could be extinct by the year 2100. Earth, the only planet in the universe known to harbor life, is coughing up blood; like a victim of a violent assault, it lies groaning in pain.

* Choose inconvenience.

Change is necessary, or rather, repentance is required. We must humble ourselves before God the Creator, having ruined the created world He made. The Earth, like the victim in the parable of the Good Samaritan, is in need of a neighbor. We have a mission to cool down the Earth. Let me reiterate: eternal life is a life of value that endures forever. I believe that this beautiful world created by God is meant to endure into God's Kingdom. That is the faith of the New Creation. God's Kingdom comes upon this very land where we dwell and walk. Preserving and caring for our beautiful Earth is a life of faith that God desires.

We must begin by taking practical steps to reduce our use of fossil fuels and plastics. Plastics are polymer compounds synthesized from fossil fuels; because of their chemical structure, they do not easily decay or decompose. We need to cultivate habits that unconditionally reduce our reliance on fossil fuels. It is better to use a bicycle than a car. I have heard it said that the bicycle will save humanity; indeed, the bicycle serves as a vital tool for coexisting with the Earth. Reducing the use of

disposable items is a fundamental attitude toward life. Please use a reusable tumbler instead of a disposable cup. Make a conscious effort to bring your tumbler when you come to church. The service committee might even consider a policy of not stocking disposable cups at all. We need to choose a lifestyle that is inconvenient, perhaps even to the point where it feels excessive. That may well be the path to reconciling with our suffering Earth. Do not forget that a life involving a bit more inconvenience is better for the planet. We are in urgent need of a lifestyle that places less burden on the Earth. After all, the essence of the Parable of the Good Samaritan is a life that chooses inconvenience for the sake of one's neighbor. We need to remember that a life of mercy, one in which we choose a life of inconvenience by investing our time, adjusting our schedules, and even spending our money, is truly a life of heaven and a life that pleases God.

* Life is a mystery

If there is a value we must reclaim in this day and age, I believe it is the sensibility to recognize that our lives are filled with mystery, and the awareness that everything we enjoy is a gift from God. In short, it is a heart of gratitude. Only those who are content can be truly grateful; those who feel a sense of lack tend to complain. Gratitude is the natural response of those who realize that the life given to them is both a gift and a mystery. Botanist and biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer writes in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*: "Expressing gratitude may seem innocent, but it is also a revolutionary concept. In a consumer society, contentment is a radical stance. Acknowledging abundance rather than scarcity strikes a blow to an economy that thrives by creating unfulfilled desires. Gratitude cultivates an ethic of fullness, whereas the economy requires a sense of emptiness. The 'Thanksgiving Address' reminds us that we already possess everything we need." (Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Edidos Publishing, p. 169). The term "Thanksgiving Address" refers to a traditional ritual of the Onondaga people, a Native American tribe. It is said that schools within this tribe begin and end the week with this address. The literal meaning of the Onondaga phrase translated as "Thanksgiving Address" is "words that come before all else." It signifies that gratitude is the very first thing that must be spoken. Students look around at the world and observe the continuing cycle of life among all created things. They acknowledge that it is humanity's duty to live in balance and harmony with creation. As they do so, they name the things for which they are grateful, one by one, and articulate the reasons why. Through this, children offer words of gratitude to the earth, water, fish, trees, crops, medicinal herbs, birds, the wind, the moon and stars, and the animals. We must help children, currently confined in front of screens, reconnect with nature. For it is only through contact with nature that such sensitivity is restored. Gratitude and contentment represent a revolutionary attitude toward life in a consumerist society. While the economy seeks to manipulate our desires by convincing us of scarcity, gratitude empowers us to resist that narrative. A life of contentment and gratitude for what we have been given marks the beginning of love for God and love for the Earth. Please become a neighbor to the Earth, which has been left wounded. A lifestyle that minimizes carbon emissions is both a prayer and an effort to restore the world to the state God saw as good. I hope you will steadfastly practice such a life without losing heart. May every act of eating, drinking, dressing, and consuming become an act of worship directed toward God.