“What must I do to inherit the kingdom of heaven?” asked an attorney. … no, this is not an attorney joke. I have too many friends who are attorneys to joke about them. Instead, I’m going to pay tribute to attorneys for asking the questions that we all should ask”

Questions like: “What must I do to inherit the kingdom of heaven?” and “Who is my neighbor?”

In my mind, the attorney in this parable represents the “thinking person”…and the “bystander.” The one who has been intellectually processing his faith and watching Jesus and his disciples grow, in numbers and in spirituality. But, from his question, I don’t think he has make a real commitment to his faith yet.

Remember, Jesus took ordinary people, from every walk of life, and made them disciples. First, he called the twelve apostles to assist him when he began his ministry in Galilee. Then, as Jesus prepared to enter the second phase of his ministry, the journey to Jerusalem, he commissioned seventy more disciples and has sent them out, two by two, to prepare the way for him (Luke 10:1-11, 16-20).

These new disciples were forerunners, evangelists, just like John the Baptist. They cured the sick and were given the authority to tread on snakes and scorpions. … now, don’t try treading on snakes and scorpions at home. They were used in ancient writings as metaphors for the power of evil.

But try to imagine the excitement in the Galilee when the seventy disciples returned home after their first mission. And imagine how that attorney must have felt when he heard their stories and the JOY in their voices as they told them. Truly the Kingdom of Heaven had come near for these disciples throughout their missions.

But the attorney was left out: he had not been appointed one of the seventy. No wonder he asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit the kingdom of heaven?”
In response, Jesus referred him to Scripture and the attorney answered his own question: In order to inherit the kingdom of heaven, “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.”

That attorney was a good scholar. He understood Jesus’ message and he brought together the laws from two books, “The Love of God” from Deuteronomy (6:4-9) and “The Love of Neighbor” from Leviticus (19:18).

By loving God in this way we acknowledge that his claim on us reaches every area of our experience: to our innermost being, our heart, to what gives us our individual identity, our soul, to our energy, strength, resolve and resources, our might, and to our understanding and intellectual capacities, our mind. We cannot withhold any part of our lives from God.

Then the attorney asked a second question, “Who is my neighbor?” Now that was a tough question. You see, like most societies, first-century Judaism was ordered by boundaries with specific rules regarding how Jews should treat Gentiles or Samaritans, how priests should relate to Israelites, how men should treat women, and so on.

Because these boundaries allowed for certain groups to establish their positions, power, and privilege, maintaining boundaries was vital to social order. Therefore, the question was really: “What are the limits of required neighborliness?”

Jesus helped him to answer that question by telling him a parable of “a certain man,” unidentified by race, religion or region, who was the victim of random violence and brutality. This certain man would have been thought of as a Jew by Jesus’ followers, as a Gentile by Luke’s audiences, and by countless listeners through the centuries as themselves.

I was that certain man once. I was hit by a stranger on a dangerous road from Chang Mai and left for dead. But there was no good Samaritan. Instead, I was saved by God’s grace and was taught compassion.

It was 1983 and I was on my way around the world. You see, I had an Auntie Mame and every year she went on a buying trip around the world and every year she would invite one of her four daughters and a family member or friend. That year it was my turn. Shelagh, her daughter, Catherine, and I
traveled by elephant to remote villages in India to buy sacred artifacts, by foot along rice paddies in Thailand to buy antique shadow puppets and by train in Japan to tiny fishing villages to buy fine pottery. I also organized a trek in the Himalayas as my contribution to the expedition.

It was one of the happiest times of my life. I felt like Marco Polo exploring places where few Westerners had been before. So you can imagine my surprise, when for no reason, I was struck down and left for dead.

I was alone that day, having decided to see the Golden Triangle by motorcycle, the only vehicle I could rent, rather than spend another day with the girls…shopping.

It happened on an old dirt road that climbed a mountain and was dotted by refuge camps from China, Tibet, Cambodia and Laos.

That primitive road had overhanging branches on one side where poisonous snakes waited for innocent travelers. The other side of that dirt road was badly eroded and unable to hold the weight of my huge bike. So I rode up the middle.

It was that decision that saved my life. You see, by the time my attacker came up behind me I had already figured out that if I had to stop this bike quickly it would be in the center of the road.

Then suddenly it happened, bang!

The back of the bike was hit by the vehicle. I flew into the air and landed on the side of my chest in the middle of the road. The fall took the wind out of me and I laid there motionless. I had the presence of mind to play dead. I simply froze… and waited.

Both motors stopped and someone came over and kicked my rigid body. I rolled over, now with my face in the dirt. Then I waited for what felt like an eternity.

Finally I heard metal being pulled from something and then a motor started up. I prayed that I would not be run over.
The vehicle slowly drove around me. I could feel its heat and movement on the earth. When I thought it was safe, I opened my eyes and lifted my head to see an empty school bus drive away. When it was out of sight I got up, checked for injuries, cleaned up my cuts and made a bandage from my T-shirt to cover the cuts on my chest. While I couldn’t breathe properly I was able to make the bike operable. So I did the only thing I could, I got back on that bike and returned to Chang Mai.

All of this took some time and I missed our flight to Bangkok. Shelagh left a scolding note to meet them at the Bangkok Intercontinental the next day. With only one flight a day out of Chang Mai, I had to take a bus overnight to the capital. My discomfort was too great to sleep, so I had lots of time to think.

“Why can’t I breathe properly? Am I going to die over here all by myself? Why would someone attempt to murder me? What if I miss Shelagh and Catherine in Bangkok? What was I thinking yesterday?”

Looking back, I realize I was the biblical character on the side of the road. I was “the Other” whom the priest and Levite didn’t want to have anything to do with. I was physically and socially separated from my tribe.

Finally we reached our destination and I went immediately to the hotel and asked for a physician who spoke English.

The physician, who had been trained in London, spoke better English than I did. He examined me, told me I would be ok and then explained why this attack happened: because no one would be held accountable for my death.

You see, the highwaymen outside of Chang Mai, like the highwaymen outside of Jerusalem, were not held responsible for what happened to someone outside their tribe. I was just another American and there were some in the early 80s who still held bad feelings about our involvement in Vietnam.

Had I been knocked out or killed that day, my body would have been eaten quickly by wild animals and what few belongings I had would have been taken by passersby. Nothing of me would remain after a matter of hours. I would simply be road kill, like the central character in Jesus’ story.
What was different about Jesus’ story, or parable, was that a good Samaritan came along, was moved by pity and showed mercy. And that’s the critical part of the story.

You see, we tend to think of Samaritans as “good” Samaritans because this story is so well known: good and Samaritan have become synonomous with one another.

In Jesus time, that was not the case. Jews considered Samaritans unclean, descendants of the mixed marriages that followed from the Assyrian settlement of people from various regions in the fallen northern kingdom hundreds of years before.

By depicting a Samaritan as the hero of the story, Jesus turned the issue from the required boundaries of neighborliness to the essential nature of neighborliness.

The Kingdom of God can be characterized by showing mercy to all in need, regardless of their race, religion, or region—and with no thought of reward. Mercy is not the conduct of a calculating heart, nor is eternal life the reward for doing prescribed duties.

So, what is the connection between these two questions: “What must I do to inherit the kingdom of heaven?” and “Who is my neighbor?”

Love. We are called to love God and to love our neighbor.

To love God with all one’s heart and one’s neighbor as oneself meant then, and now, that one must often reject society’s rules in favor of codes of the kingdom—a society without distinctions and boundaries between its members.

The rules of the kingdom are just two—to love God and one’s neighbor—but these rules are radically different from those of the society in which we live. Living by God’s rules calls us to disregard all else and to break some of society’s rules in order to follow Jesus’ example.
Jesus taught us that that love must be extended even to our enemies (Mt. 5:43-48). This form of Christian love is often referred to as charity (I Cor. 13:13).

For centuries theologians have struggled to understand the nature and forms of love. Paul Tillich defined love as the moving power of life that brings about the unity of the separated. Such power is especially significant in human life because each individual must find unity with others, but in a way that also retains the integrity or centeredness of each person and which avoids absorption by the other.

The Good Samaritan loved his neighbor because he showed mercy and through his love he brought unity between the injured man, the Other, and society.

That’s healing: taking something that has been separated, or broken, and making it complete.

What does that look like in real life? Well, it could be something as simple as showing mercy to:
- a friend or relative who lives in isolation, or
- a family member who has been separated from the world by addiction, or
- the prisoner separated from the world at large, or
- the hospital patient who has just lost hope for survival, or
- the people of Haiti separated from the world by poverty and tragedy…

That is what we are called to do: to heal the sick, the broken, the separated, and in doing so, to tread on scorpions and snakes, or to stop the power of evil.

But if you are like the attorney in the parable, the “thinking person,” the one who has been standing back, intellectually processing your faith and watching others grow in theirs. If you haven’t make a real commitment to your faith yet, listen to the words Jesus gave the attorney:

“Go and do likewise.” Be a disciple of Jesus, and find the joy, experience the Kingdom of God in your life. Amen.