

Monday, August 29 – Read Matthew 22:35-40. When asked what was the greatest commandment (which was a lively debate among Jewish rabbis of his day), Jesus chose not one but two. The first was from Deuteronomy 6:4: “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind.” The second came from Leviticus 19:18: “You must love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Jesus said all other truths have ultimate value only as they lead us to more fully love God and others. Jesus said that every key principle the Bible teaches, all the truths we know about what God wants, “depend” on the two commands he quoted. What do you believe made these two commands as essential as Jesus said they were? Can you recall any time when a belief you held led you to be unloving, maybe even without realizing it? Long before many of our modern psychological insights developed, Leviticus called God’s people to “love your neighbor as yourself.” That command implicitly asked: how well can you love your neighbor if you don’t have healthy ways of loving and caring for yourself? How well have you learned to nurture and value yourself, outwardly and, even more importantly, inwardly?

Tuesday, August 30 – Read Luke 10:25-32. The story Jesus told in answer to the lawyer’s question is familiar. When we read it, we tend to think of it first (and maybe even exclusively) as being about responding to other people in crisis. But Jesus told the parable to answer a question about being a neighbor. His main focus was on how neighborly or non-neighborly the people who passed on the road were, not on the specific reasons why the man was beside the road. Verse 29 said, “The legal expert wanted to prove that he was right, so he said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” Are there people in your neighborhood, your community or your world whom you’d rather not think of as your “neighbor”? Have you ever found one or more of the limits you wanted to put on your definition of “neighbor” changing after you got to know the person or persons? Since Jesus agreed with the lawyer’s answer, it may seem odd for Luke to write, “The legal expert wanted to prove that he was right.” Maybe Jesus’ words “Do this and you will live” (verse 28) hit a nerve. Maybe the lawyer wanted to say, “I’m already fine—I don’t need any more saving.” Have there been any times in your life when you’ve felt like saying, “Talk to someone else about grace and forgiveness—I’m fine”? What helps you accept God’s salvation gratefully every day?

Wednesday, August 31 – Read Luke 10:33-37. In the first part of his story, Jesus portrayed two presumably pious men who showed no real interest in acting like a neighbor. Then he made the contrast as strong as possible. He pictured a Samaritan who acted with extravagant compassion and caring. In the story, the Samaritan didn't just offer casual roadside help. He put the injured man on "his own donkey" (which would have meant he had to walk), brought him to an inn, cared for him, paid two days' wages and offered to pay more on his return if needed. How did Jesus' description of the Samaritan reflect God's vast generosity to us? How can knowing we've received God's generosity move us to be generous to our neighbors in ways we'd be unlikely to achieve out of our own goodness? We usually apply this parable to the need for us to help others, a big part of Jesus' teaching. But in this story, an Israelite accepted a Samaritan's help, though Israelites usually shunned such help. How open are you to accepting help from others when you need it? Have you ever seen a situation in which asking for or accepting help opened the door to a neighborly relationship?

Thursday, September 1 – Read Jeremiah 29:4-7. Babylon took many Hebrews into exile in 597 B.C., and then destroyed Jerusalem in a final conquest in 586 B.C. In that interim, the prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter to the Hebrews who had already been taken to Babylon. It included today's reading. He offered no false comfort, but told them they should settle down and prepare for a long period of exile. But even as captives in that foreign land, he urged them to live as good neighbors. Some "prophets" were telling the Israelites that God would send them back to Israel within two years (see Jeremiah 28:3). If you had been an exile, wouldn't you have wanted that to be true, rather than Jeremiah's "wait, and be a good neighbor" message? Have you ever been disappointed with God's timing? How do you maintain patience and hope when things aren't working out as you'd wish, when you wish? In that same message, Jeremiah told the Israelites (on God's behalf): "When you search for me, yes, search for me with all your heart, you will find me" (Jeremiah 29:13). In what ways was the quality of their connection with God essential to them being able to live as good neighbors even when in exile? What do you believe it would mean for you to seek God "with all your heart," and how might that shape your ways of relating to others and giving yourself away?

Friday, September 2 – Read Romans 13:8-10; 14:10-13. Paul sent this letter to Roman house churches. In Romans 14-15, we see that these churches differed. Some were mainly Jewish; others mostly Gentile. Their customs and standards of “righteousness” varied. It was easy for them to tear each other down. Paul said God’s kingdom calls us to a standard of relating that goes beyond particular rules or laws. “Love doesn’t do anything wrong to a neighbor” was a big challenge to people at odds with one another. It was (and is) vital, because “Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law.” Paul spoke to disagreements over relatively minor issues. How do you think some of them might have initially reacted to the statement that “Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law”? Do you know anyone who is genuinely loving, but in some parts of life acts in ways that you think miss the mark? Do you believe Paul was right, or was he too soft on “law breakers”? What attitudes and actions bring peace and build up other people in your neighborhood (or in your church, for that matter)? Are some of those attitudes and actions practically second nature for you? Identify one or two which do not come so naturally to you, but in which you would truly like to grow. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you grow in those aspects of life and relationships.