

Given the headlines of the past week, this parable from Luke's Jesus seems especially well-timed. We hope and expect to find an alternative from the life of Jesus—a pattern for treating all people as human beings and neighbors, rather than as potential dangers or as monsters.

And there is a pattern in this parable but to harvest its fruit, we have to explore the conversation that wraps around the parable. The story of the Good Samaritan is so familiar that we can easily forget that Jesus is talking to a biblical scholar. We use the term “lawyer” because the King James translators didn't have a word for “Torah expert”. So it is not an attorney, but a scholar who engaged Hebrew scripture in the pursuit of truth. That's who stood up to test Jesus.

Luke frames the parable as a discussion of what it means to become an insider in the life of God. The scholar asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” to challenge Jesus into a duel of knowledge and interpretation. And Jesus responds by asking two questions that may appear redundant: “What is written in the Torah?” and then: “What do you read there?”

These two questions, rather than being redundant, form the heart of rabbinical scriptural study. The first question calls on the scholar's knowledge of scripture and the second challenge invites interpretation. By asking them together, Jesus conveys the rabbinical awareness that scripture is alive with the presence of God. Scripture is not dead words to be taken at face value nor is it books of empty phrases into which we can pour whatever we want.

And to show the scholar that he is up to the challenge to his honor, Jesus' questions carry just enough of an insult to show that he is game to play. The scholar's first move is to quote part of the Shema, the prayer that forms the essence of daily Jewish devotion and the summary of Torah: the command to love God with all of one's being, followed by the command to love one's neighbor. Jesus agrees that to be in right relationship with God and neighbor is the righteous path, and the two have set the stage for a friendly competition—a game, of sorts, set now among social equals.

But then Luke tells us that the scholar wants to justify himself, and this is a move that changes the stakes of the game considerably. Not satisfied that Jesus has agreed with him, the scholar now appears to have limitations on his mind.

Now there are those who find the scholar to be insincere, hostile or small-minded. But I wonder. I wonder if his encounter with Jesus hasn't just deeply

impressed him—maybe enough to lead him to ask an unguarded question. One that may cross our own minds these days: “Who, *exactly*, do I have to love?”

Now, as Jesus answers, the Greek phrase is gorgeous. “*Taking up him*, Jesus said...” Having taken the man up without judgment or shame, Jesus begins the parable that has become so familiar. Familiar, but underestimated. Because while this story is, indeed, a morality tale about showing hospitality to the unfortunate, Luke’s deliberate setting of this story in the context of a specific conversation makes the parable considerably richer.

Remember: first century Mediterraneans were not individualistic in their thinking. They could only understand themselves as part of a collective, and never as a singular, separate entity. Consequently, they tended to accept stereotypes as authentic, trustworthy assessments of other people. That is to say, to know *one* person in a category was to know *all* the people in that category. The people hearing this parable assumed that all people from Jericho shared common characteristics; all people from Nazareth shared others; all Samaritans were like this; all Levites like that, and all priests were like something else.

With that in mind, a pivotal question arises. Why did Jesus give a Samaritan the heroic leading role? Just two weeks ago, we heard about the disciples traveling from Jericho to Jerusalem and looking for a place to spend the night in a Samaritan village. When the villagers refused to provide hospitality, James and John wanted to call down fire on the village. So Jesus and those listening in on this conversation have little reason to regard a Samaritan positively, let alone as an example of how to love one’s neighbor.

The scholar and the people listening would have had some assumptions about the first person to show up in the parable. The man is traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho—exactly the opposite direction that Jesus and his companions are walking. Being stripped of his clothing meant that they could not identify his occupation or social status, but the man had money and so they could reasonably assume that he was a Jewish tradesman or a skilled worker.

Next came a priest, a Levite descendant of Aaron, and after that a Levite who was not a priest, but who assisted in liturgies or taught Torah. Both of these categories of people were held in high esteem because of their association with the Jerusalem temple, the religious institution of Judea. As such, they sat at the very peak of the purity code, which meant that for them to touch the naked, bloody and possibly dead body of a man who may have been a Samaritan would have rendered them unfit for the ritual that they were setting out to perform. So

while their behavior would have been unsettling, at least there were cultural excuses available.

But then came the real shocker: A Samaritan, and not just any Samaritan, but one with oil, wine and significant financial resources. That meant he was probably a trader, an occupation that Judeans despised because traders working between Jericho and Jerusalem often got rich at the expense of others.

Judeans had no love for Samaritans, whom they disparaged as not purely Jewish. The Samaria of Jesus' day corresponds roughly to the West Bank home of modern Palestinians in today's Israel. The Assyrian conquest of Samaria led to at least 700 years of animosity between Judeans and Samaritans by the time Luke's Gospel was written.

To recreate the shock in your own mind, imagine Jesus giving the heroic role to someone representing a group that you dislike. For me, that group is fundamentalists who promote something called "Christian Zionism." I get the fuller impact of the story when I hear Jesus saying, "but then Pat Robertson came near the man and his heart was moved."

Not only was the despised Samaritan's heart moved, but he saw the wounded man as another human being and he made himself vulnerable by moving toward the wounded man. And then he acted. He acted heroically and at great cost to himself. He acted in a way that I can only rarely bring myself to act. So when I imagine Pat Robertson acting in a Christ-like way in a situation where I would more likely be justifying my inaction, I am forced to imagine God's presence in someone I really dislike.

And that, for me, is the deeper lesson of the parable: that the impulse toward self-justification can blind us to the presence of God in each other, especially in those we fear or mistrust or dislike. And we are never more blind than when we refuse to see the Holy Spirit in those whom we choose to see as stereotypes instead of people.

I think the scholar has learned something valuable by the end of the parable. When Jesus asks him "who was the neighbor?" the scholar does not give the name of a group. He answers with a description of love in action: "The one who showed him mercy." He answers correctly. He can see now what it truly means to be inside the life of God.

God's love is category busting. Jesus brings that point home by telling a story about the most unlikely of people shattering all stereotypes to serve as an example of God's mercy. And so when we hear people chanting "Black lives matter," instead of thinking to ourselves, "Well, of course, *all* lives matter," we might stop for a minute and ponder what it must be like to actually have to say

those words so that the people in charge of guarding human lives start seeing people instead of stereotypes. And when people take it upon themselves to avenge unjust killings by randomly killing police (another category), instead of giving in to our fear and rage, we might pause to reflect our own part in fortifying the violence that understandably drags police toward warrior mentalities.

God gives us all the grace that we need to exemplify Christ-like behavior. God sees us and comes closer to us, taking on some of our vulnerability and pain and transforming it into love. Through Christ, God experienced death on the cross and rose again so that fear and death no longer enslave us. We need to act as though we actually trust that pattern of grace.

The question can no longer be “Who, exactly, do I have to love to inherit eternal life?” but this: “How will we embody and spread the love that God gives?”

God chooses unlikely people to do amazing things through them; even through you and me. Like the scholar, we can remember to actually see each other, and to see *people*, not Samaritans or Judeans. Not to see Republicans or Democrats, conservatives or liberals, but to see children of God. We can allow our hearts to be moved toward each other and calm our fears of coming closer to our brothers and sisters just because we may have to bear some of their pain.

Isn't that what it means to show mercy?

Go and do likewise.

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