

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "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." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

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"The Good Samaritan." This has to be among the top five most well-known stories in Christian scripture. And for a story that we seem to admire so much, we sure do pack it with a lot of unnecessary baggage. For centuries, we have supposed that the Samaritan represented Jesus or that the oil and wine represented either Baptism and the Eucharist, or the Old and New Testaments. That seems harmless, although a bit much.

What the text really doesn't support is the notion that the priest and the Levite represent failures of the Law and the Prophets to put human suffering ahead of ritual cleanliness. And yet, commentators to this day propose that the priest and the Levite refused to help the man they thought to be dead or dying because of impurity rules in the Torah against touching a corpse.

I wonder. Maybe it's not the story but our *interpretations* that have become familiar. Because it really is a simpler story; a Jewish story.

Jesus is a Jew telling a parable situated in Judea. All the people in this reading are Jews, including the Samaritan who considers himself a Jew. And the Jewish man "going down from Jerusalem to Jericho" is leaving the Temple, not going toward it. The priest and the Levite are also walking *down* from the Temple on the winding road that still drops nearly 3,300 feet downhill

from Jerusalem to Jericho. One always walks physically and spiritually *up to* Jerusalem and *down from* Jerusalem.

What all that implies is that the priest is *not* preparing for Temple service. And the rule concerning ritual impurity and corpses never applied to Levites. The simpler truth, according to Jewish literature before Jesus and the Rabbinic literature of the day, is that both the priest and the Levite *should* have stopped and helped. They were *not* following Torah. Jesus has put them in his parable to teach something quite different. Something very Jewish.

The reason Jesus names a priest and a Levite in his parable has nothing to do with Temple purity. Jesus is challenging some assumptions. In Judaism, three lineages have survived through the centuries. Some Jews are *priestly* descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses. Other Jews are *Levite* offspring of Moses' ancestor Levi, the son of Jacob and Leah. The rest are either descended from Jacob's other sons or are Jews by choice. They are the *Israelites*.

Calling out the first two sets an expectation for the third in the people hearing this parable. Just like, if I were to say "Father, Son...", you would expect what? You would expect "Holy Spirit" to follow.

So when Jesus names a priest, a Levite and a *Samaritan*, rather than the expected Israelite, his listeners are knocked off-balance. And to have the Samaritan do the right thing after the other two have chosen not to – and for no good reason – well, that would have been nearly intolerable.

You see, we've lost something else over the centuries. Time has dulled the ragged edge of the title we give this parable. Calling a story "the Parable of the Good Muslim" or "the Good Immigrant," begins to expose what Jesus is provoking. Like "the Good Samaritan," these phrases imply that we can assume that every other person named in the group, except this one, should be held in a negative light.

That is, in fact, the attitude surrounding most of the people listening to this parable. Jesus never uses the phrase. It never appears anywhere in the parable. Ironically, the key that unlocks the teaching in this parable is the person who disappears from our awareness in this reading.

At the very beginning of the reading, "a certain lawyer stood up to test Jesus." Remember him? A highly educated, literate man asks a legitimate question, a question that appears to want a real answer: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Now, in the passage immediately before this reading, Jesus thanked God for revealing spiritual insights to his followers that have been concealed from “the wise and clever.” Now a “wise and clever” man stands before Jesus. This “certain lawyer” seems genuinely interested in a heavenly truth that seems to be escaping him.

I wonder if we aren’t too quick to dismiss his questioning as a devious trap or the defense of an inflexible position. He may actually be probing for something that is lacking in his otherwise enviable grasp of the teachings. “What must I do? *By what deeds* may I inherit eternal life?”

Jesus responds with two more questions: “What is written in the Law, the Torah? How do you read it?” The lawyer responds with something Jesus has said elsewhere, Israel’s signature understanding of the summary of the Torah; to love God and neighbor as oneself. Jesus tells the lawyer that he has answered correctly and then adds: “*Do this* and you shall live.”

The lawyer probes a little further with a second penetrating question. If loving God and loving neighbor are matters of eternal life, then defining “neighbor” is essential. As a lawyer, the man is skilled at questions seeking definition and meaning. As a student of Torah, he knows that to observe Torah is to live in right relationship with God. And so, his questioning here reveals his hopes not to *limit* Torah observance but to *fulfill* what God asks.

He asks a boundary question: “And who is my neighbor?” The flip side implied in the question is “And who *isn’t* my neighbor?” Citizenship rights, liturgical roles, who gets to join in which activities – *legal* concerns like these can be reasonable because people need clarifying distinctions to function together. Some make them more tactfully and flexibly than others, but they are not trivial.

Christians often hear the lawyer's desire to “justify himself” as if he imagines that his salvation depends on his own righteousness. That really doesn’t reflect the experience of the people trying to observe Torah in the time of Jesus or any other time. Jesus is a Jew living inside the world of Torah observance and is quite at home there. His response to the lawyer's second question is a skillful practice of Torah interpretation.

He tells a story.

In the story, Jesus presents two people who were insiders according to the law, but who chose not to act on the teachings. The appearance of the Samaritan brings an on-going debate to light. Samaritans worship the God of

the Jews found in Genesis, but they find God on Mount Gerizim rather than in Jerusalem. They follow the teachings of Torah, but their version of the Five Books of Moses is slightly different. They claim the same ancestry of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but isolated themselves from the Jews who were exiled in Babylon.

The Samaritans are definitely not Gentiles, but are they Jews?

In the parable, Jesus refocuses the legal question beyond the debate and at the end, asks the lawyer: “Who, of these three, does it seem to you became a neighbor to the man falling among robbers?”

And once again, the man answers correctly. When it comes to love, the categories of “insider” and “outsider” are swept into a secondary consideration because what comes first, what we all share most deeply, is our common humanity; our status as children of God. The lawyer understands that acting in loving, right relationship encompasses any person in need regardless, at least for the time, of anything else we think we know about them.

What a person *does* in moments like this defines a neighbor more than who a neighbor *is*. Jesus' final words, "go and *do* likewise" parallel his answer to the lawyer's first question, "*do* this and you will live."

The shock of a Samaritan taking the expected place of an Israelite in the parable probably challenged the lawyer. To hear that an “outsider” may actually be quicker than “insiders” to extend a loving hand may have surprised him. And yet, his deeper realization is the possibility that the “wrong kind of person” might act with compassion; that some “other” who is not in alignment with him may be more ready to act ethically toward the lawyer than he has been ready to act toward a Samaritan.

With that, the lawyer disappears. And we are left with his realizations.

When we hear this parable, we often find ourselves identifying with the beaten man or the priest or the Levite, and we aspire to be the Samaritan. But there is one other character that we were most meant to identify with all along.

The lawyer. The lawyer is me and the lawyer is you. Us.

We can recite the double command to love God and neighbor. We have a helpful sense of those who are known practitioners and those who are guests or strangers. All that's left to live in right relationship is to go and *show* God's loving mercy. To go and *do* likewise. And as we go, to keep asking what it looks like to follow God's law and who seems to be doing it.

We might be shocked at who is trying to do the same.

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