

A Man Went Down From Jerusalem to Jericho

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Have you ever noticed how many jokes and stories have three parts? “A rabbi, a priest and a Baptist preacher get to heaven....” A doctor, lawyer and preacher were walking down the road. The Three Little Pigs; The Three Bears; etc...The punch line usually comes with the third character in the story. Jesus told a parable in a familiar story form of his day, but threw in a huge surprise at the end.

Of course, we know the surprise because we’ve heard it so often. And its familiar title, “The Parable of the Good Samaritan”, gives it away from the beginning.

The early church was wiser. They called parables by their first line. So, instead of “The Parable of the Prodigal Son”, they called it “A Certain Man Had Two Sons”—which is truer to the story as a whole. And today’s parable was named, “A Man Went Down From Jerusalem to Jericho”. It preserves the surprise at the end.

This parable has become universal in meaning. I met a Filipino who did not know the parable, but he knew what a “good Samaritan” was. How many hospitals and helping agencies through the centuries have been named “Good Samaritan Hospital”, etc. The Church of the Savior in Washington D.C. has a ministry called “Samaritan House” which provides a safe place for people to get well when they are released from the hospital but have no viable place to go.

And, no passage so easily evokes the three questions we are using as we journey together through *Luke*: Who am I in this story? What is God calling me to be and to do? And, Who is my neighbor, the one God is calling me to love as myself?

I

A bit of background on Samaritans in Jesus’ time and culture. Jews despised Samaritans for racial and religious reasons. Samaritans had long ago intermarried with non-Jews, and they had rival holy places and scriptures. Religion and race can become a deadly stew of hatred and bigotry. I remember flying somewhere soon after 9/11. As I reached the airport door a man with a turban and darker skin and different clothes reached to help me with my bags. He worked for the airlines, but I froze for a moment. Even to read the name Al Qaeda causes some churning inside. And as for religion, Paschal said centuries ago,

“Humankind never does evil so completely and so cheerfully as from religious conviction.

In the preceding chapter in Luke Jesus and his disciples were traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem. Most Jews on this route went well out of the way to avoid going through Samaria. It’s like going from Atlanta to Washington D.C. by way of Knoxville, Tennessee to avoid Charlotte. But Jesus and his disciples passed right through Samaria on their way. When a Samaritan village refused to provide hospitality to them—the bigotry went both ways--- two of the disciples, James and John, aptly named “Sons of Thunder”, came back to Jesus and asked if they could command fire to come down from heaven and destroy the village. Jesus sternly rebuked them, but you get the idea of the animosity between Jews and Samaritans. (See Luke 9:51-56).

II

As our text opens today a scholar, an expert in the Law of Moses, the Torah, comes to Jesus and asks that most elemental question, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” The text says that he did so “to try him out.” Was it to trap him? Or, was he a genuine seeker yearning for the answer to his deepest spiritual questions? We do not know, but Jesus fully received him and his question.

Jesus asked in good rabbinical fashion: “What is written in the Law?” Or, how do you read Torah on this question? The man quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 replied: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus said, “you have answered rightly. Do this and you will live.” Truly live, deeply live, live in the eternal dimension. “Do this.” Not admire this, memorize this, agree with this, “Do this and live”.

The deepest purpose of the church is this: The increase in the love of God and neighbor. If a church is doing well they are doing both, increasing the love of God and increasing the love of neighbor.

Then the man “desiring to justify himself”—that’s the normal translation---asked “And who is my neighbor?” I translate it this way: The man “wanting to be sure he was righteous.” Every good Jew strove to be a righteous person, a *tazddik*. This man wanted to be sure. “Who is my neighbor?”

How do you define “neighbor?” Neighbor in the Greek means “one who is near.” How near? Whom do I have to love as I love myself? Which is also to ask, whom do I *not* have to love. What are the limits of my obligation? We can sympathize. We can get “compassion fatigue” as we see so much need in the world, and around our doorstep.

Well, Jesus did what he often did: he answered a question with a story. Stories move us from spectators to participants. They engage us. They don't provide a simple, easy answer. The answer to the parable, the key to its understanding is *in us!*

III

So now to the story. "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho." The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a treacherous 17 mile stretch that dropped 3,000 feet in elevation. There were numerous passes and blind alleys where robbers could hide. The man was attacked by robbers who robbed him, stripped him, beat him and left him half-dead. Here he was, naked, bloody, unidentifiable and hanging on to his life.

Now here comes the three-part story. "By chance", the story told, a priest came down that road, and when he saw him he "passed by on the other side." There may have been good reasons to do so. Human fear to start with. The robbers could have been waiting for him too. And to touch a corpse would make the priest ritually unclean, and a ritually unclean priest is as useful as a doctor with typhoid fever. The man lying there could have been dead. For whatever reasons, he made a circle and passed him by.

Then a Levite came by and, as with the priest, “passed by on the other side.” A Levite in that day was charged with getting the temple ready for worship, and sometimes led in the music and liturgy in the temple.

So we might tell the story this way: First a preacher came by, took a quick look, adjusted his suit and tie and “passed by on the other side.” “I’ve got visiting to do!” Then a Minister of Music came by, looked, got back in her Toyota, and said, “I’ve got to get to choir rehearsal.”

So the preacher blew it, the minister of music blew it. Now what we would expect next in the story was a *humble deacon*—if that’s not a contradiction in terms. For, in Jesus’ day the audience would have expected next, after the priest and the Levite, was a Jewish lay person. That was the way the stories went. But Jesus threw in a most unexpected twist: “But a Samaritan” came down the road.

IV

Watch now how Jesus slows down the action. “But a Samaritan.” A Samaritan?! Unlike the other two he moved close enough to *see*. And the text says he had “compassion” on him. A God-like compassion, the kind of compassion Jesus was talking about when he said earlier in Luke’s Sermon on the Plain: “Be compassionate as your Father [in heaven] is compassionate.” The kind of

“compassion” Jesus had when he healed the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:13), and the woman with the issue of blood and the twelve-year-old girl.

Notice now the Samaritan’s actions. He *went* to the man and *bound* his wounds, *pouring* on them wine and oil. Then he *set* him on his own animal and *brought* him and *took care* of him, nursing him through the night. The next day he *took* out two denarii—two day’s wages---and gave them to the innkeeper saying, “Take care of him, and whatever more you need, *I will repay* when I *come back*.”

Compassion in action. “Do this and you will live,” Jesus said to the scholar of the law, then at the end, “Go thou and do likewise.”

What lavish, risky, reckless, costly love the Samaritan showed. Here is a Samaritan pulling him into a Jewish town, and checking him in at the Jewish inn. He could have been blamed for the robbing. He might well have just dropped the man off on the steps of the inn in the middle of the night and disappeared, no questions asked. That would have been gracious enough. But he stayed the night, paid the bill-maybe with money he could scarcely afford to give away—and left his credit card with the inn-keeper.

Again, here is a shockingly extravagant act of compassion taken at great personal risk. *Who can love like that? Who can be such a neighbor?*

V

With whom have you identified in this parable? The priest, the Levite? We've all been there. So busy or fearful, or overly-cautious with our lives. The inn-keeper? He could easily have turned the two away. "This is a hotel, not a hospital!" But unlike the inn-keeper in the Christmas story, he said, "There's room in the inn."

As we think about such questions, the key question is one of calling. Where do you sense a call at work? Need is everywhere. But where can God best use *you*, with your talents and gifts?

Who is the man lying by the road? Our neighbor whom God is calling me, calling us to love? Who in Statesville can we stop and see and begin to help? And as Jesus turned the story at the end, to whom can we *be* a neighbor?

My own hearing of the parable was utterly changed as I read a book by a young Harvard theologian named Arthur McGill who died too young in 1980. In his book *Suffering: A Test of Theological Method*¹, he probed the question, "Who is the Samaritan in the parable?" and who are we?" The early church in its interpretation of this parable emphasized the same point.

Who are *we*? We are the man in the ditch by the side of the road, injured and helpless.

And who is the Samaritan? Who has come near enough to see our need? Who has come and nursed our wounds and carried us to an inn and paid the price? Who has dared to love like that? With such risky, extravagant life-giving love?

It is Jesus. He is the Samaritan who loving us, loved us to the end, who loved us and gave himself for us. Will we let him love us so? Let God love us so?

Then we *so loved by him* will become neighbor to all because he was neighbor to us. We will go to the helpless because we once were so helpless and then so loved.

The Kingdom of God, the Realm of God, is where Samaritans become heroes, where victims are made well and where those who are trying so hard to be righteous are loved into a deeper righteousness than they ever dreamed, something like compassion, which is as close as we ever come to holiness.

1. See Arthur McGill, *Suffering a Test of Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), pp. 108ff. For further reading on this parable and other parables I recommend Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* and *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1983); and Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989)

