

“And behold! a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.” That’s actually how our Gospel reading ought to start out. If we more concisely translated the original Greek with “And behold!” we would be alerted as listeners that something is up. Our Gospel writer Luke opens this story showing that he wants to make an example of this lawyer. But not only *this lawyer* but all of those who are typically placed among the “wise.” So although this lawyer would be included in that group, as he would have been an expert in the law of Moses, what he reveals is an appalling lack of understanding that Jesus will try to remedy.

The lawyer fails to make his inquiry simple. He doesn’t just ask, “What shall I do?” like many people did who earnestly asked John the Baptizer in the wilderness. Rather, he is cocky enough to try to put Jesus to the test. “Teacher,” he asks, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” By attaching a little rider onto his question he indicates that he wants Jesus to describe a program of selective virtue.

In typical rabbinical style and being a wise counselor, Jesus turns the question back to the lawyer. In effect, Jesus says, “What does the Torah (our foundational document) say?” And the lawyer, for his part, answers quite appropriately with the double command that comes from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. Basically, his answer nails it. The correct answer is, “God is to absorb all our resources, and the neighbor is to be entrusted with the love we have for ourselves.” As a quick side-note, self-love is not to be denied or disparaged. For example, we can see how someone might try to twist this rule to say, “I do not wish my neighbors to interfere in my life, so I will not interfere in theirs.” This of course, does not cut it. Like it or not, we *are* called to love and serve our neighbors, meaning that there is no getting around the level of individual and corporate responsibility that comes into play.

Hearing the lawyer’s response, Jesus generously compliments him, “You have given the right answer.” And we can almost imagine the lawyer puffing himself up for a moment. But then Jesus challenges him to action, “Do this, and you will live.” This is right in line with what Jesus has been telling people all along, “Listen to the word and keep it.” Because when you do so, you open yourself up to the wonderful things that God has in store for you. Unfortunately for the lawyer, this exchange is not ending the way he had

planned. From his place of privilege, he fears what Jesus is talking about will throw everything he has worked for so hard all out-of-whack. He is not ready or willing to listen to Jesus say that the law of love is the paramount. It's as though he is saying, "Yeah love is first and foremost but people like me still get to define it, right? I mean, there has to be rules and laws that benefit me and my privilege and there has to be established norms that keep me (and people like me) in power, or, or, where does that leave me?" See, if everything is based on love, then God alone can judge because God alone knows our hearts and our minds, what truly motivates us.

So, of course, the very next line after Jesus tells him, "Do this, and you will live" is, in a sense, the crux of the story. "But wanting to justify himself..." What does that word justify mean, really? In this case it means to make right. In other words, he wants to be in charge of his own righteousness. He doesn't actually want God to do it for him. But even more than that, what we discover by his next question is not only does he want to be in charge of his own rightness with God, in a sense he wants to be in charge of everyone's. That's what he believes is his job after all as a lawyer or scribe, an interpreter of the Torah. What he may be thinking is that Jesus is proposing to throw out the "time-honored ways of living" and actually put love of God and neighbor first. But, but, don't we need social stability, don't we need things clearly defined, people need me, society needs me, God needs me to, to, to clarify things like, like, "Who is my neighbor?"

Now this is a question Jesus is eager to answer. How does he do it? With a story. One that has become so famous and familiar, we may have a hard time hearing it for what it is. An amazingly simple, yet mind-blowing story. In Jesus' day, it might have worked for Jesus to make a Samaritan the victim and object of a Jew's concern — that would certainly have pushed some buttons and caused people to expand their idea of neighbor. But Jesus does something far more unexpected. He makes the Samaritan the principal actor in the story. Can a non-Israelite be thought of in the same neighborly terms as one who shared Jewishness? Or, to push people's buttons like Jesus did, can a non-white be thought of in the same neighborly terms as one who does not share my "whiteness"? This lawyer had a much bigger problem than he wanted to admit to. He needed to see

just how phony it is to have religion without love, and to follow the laws of a religion without having your heart truly in it.

In telling this parable, Jesus does a remarkable twist in terms of who's on the inside and who's on the outside. If you're like me, you probably do not initially identify with the man who is robbed, assaulted, and left for dead. He's just a nameless victim, barely human, "left half dead." And we certainly aren't about to humanize those who are the robbers; we do not care why they steal or break the law — even if oppressive structures and unjust systems leave people desperate. But when people are hungry, when they feel their very lives are threatened, it doesn't fly to say again and again, wait your turn, your time will come. And to be perfectly honest, I have never thought about the robbers in this story before. And that only complicates the story and the primary question about "who is my neighbor?" even more.

In any case, we next hear of a priest and a Levite, both of whom we (or is it just me), from my/our place of moral superiority, scoff at and look down upon. But about the time we may be feeling smug, Jesus mashes up the story further. We're still looking for someone in the parable that we can identify with, and Jesus makes it more challenging yet! In today's terms, it might be as though Jesus says, "But an Iranian Arab (or a... fill in your own blank) while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity." See, Jesus forces all of us to look at our own biases and prejudices. He won't let us enjoy a cheap and easy identification with the hero, the good guy, because he's someone we like to hate, which, for the Jews of Jesus' day was a Samaritan.

Now, there are a few more details of this story that challenge us also. For example, the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was about 18 miles and was notorious for its hazards. Attacks were frequent. So, if you have ever felt victimized or been hurting badly in some form or another, you would certainly greatly appreciate that "by chance" someone comes along. Yet chief among the many privileges of our lives is the exercise of choice. Notice that Jesus clearly states that both men *saw him*. There's no convenient excuse in that regard. Perhaps they were afraid for their own safety? But whatever the reason(s), they make a conscious choice to demonstrate a lovelessness that finds

comfort in distance. Much like how we interpret the behavior of our friend, the lawyer. But as I noted above, this is not just the brokenness of a few pious individuals, this story is meant to force all of us to rethink and change how we treat our neighbor in need.

Now we do well to note that the Samaritan himself had every reason to keep moving too. After all, he has his own animal and he has money; this reveals that he is a man of some wealth and therefore, could also be a target for robbers. Yet despite the fact that he sees what the others saw, he responds with compassion. He takes the time to bandage the man's wounds, put him on his own animal, brings him to an inn, and even stays overnight to care for him. He then emphatically tells the innkeeper to take care of him and says, "When I come back, *I, not the man*, will pay." Part of the shock is that the Samaritan is not merely a "baskets at Thanksgiving" type or the occasional self-serving do-gooder. No, he kept vigil through the night and did not leave his "neighbor" to chance assistance, he models divine compassion and neighborly love.

So, in conclusion, Jesus goes far beyond the biblical definition of Leviticus 19 by asking, "Who was neighbor to that man?" Jesus reveals how clearly the lawyer's question had been wrongly phrased. Do not start with, "Who is qualified for my help?" But instead, "What need can I meet?" Because love of God and love of neighbor does not reside in the cozy refuge of rules and regulations and definitions but bursts out into a life of imaginative and innovative enterprise. What determines the choice of neighbor? Not law or social strata or whatever convenient criteria we may come up with but simply love. To show divine mercy is to never ask the worth or worthiness of the recipient. It only sees the need. We are called to adopt the Samaritans way of thinking. Our story started out with "And behold, a lawyer stood up to test Jesus." And we might think of our ending as, "And behold a Samaritan showed mercy." The lawyer wanted to know what to do to inherit eternal life and Jesus answers in our concluding verse, "Go, and see that you make a habit of doing like the Samaritan." Amen

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Luke 10:25-37
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