

Who is My Neighbor

Luke 10:25-37

Have you ever asked a question  
you already knew the answer to?

Or asked a question  
to trap or trick someone?

“Tripp, are you going to put away  
the ice cream carton  
*you* got out?”

Clinically, I believe we call this  
passive aggressive  
and I do it very well.

So does Luke’s lawyer.



It seems like today trial lawyers  
make a career out of  
asking questions, they already know  
the answer to.

But this lawyer wants something  
and his agenda already reveals  
a certain mistrust or suspicion  
when it comes to Jesus;  
Luke puts it plainly,  
he wants to test Jesus  
and justify himself.

At first, his question seems simple,  
*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*  
It is like an easy under-handed lob for a rabbi.  
On the surface it seems innocent;  
but its simplicity is almost a baited trap.

Luke wants us to see  
the flaw in the lawyer’s question  
—when the lawyer uses the verb for **do**,

*(as in what must **I do** to inherit eternal life)*  
his **do** implies a single, one-time action  
—something to do efficiently—  
as if perhaps  
he can inherit eternal life before lunch.<sup>1</sup>

Not only is his question  
a, *one and done* sort of mentality,  
his question also frames eternal life  
as though it were a commodity to possess.

Eternal life meant first, salvation for life lived here and now  
so that when all things had been made right,  
when *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world  
had been reached, in the fullness of time  
then eternal life would be for all.

Which is why Jesus, sensing  
the flaws and misunderstanding in question  
cleverly asks the lawyer,  
*what is written in the law,*  
*what **do you** read and understand*  
*is written there?*  
*You are a guide and leader of the law,*  
*what do you understand it says?*  
*How do you apply it to your life?*



The lawyer answers correctly,  
quoting Deuteronomy  
—love the Lord your God  
with all your heart  
and with all your soul

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<sup>1</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of A Controversial Rabbi* (HarperOne, New York) pg.84

and with all your strength  
and with all your your mind  
and intention  
**and** love your neighbor as yourself

But here is where  
he hopes reel Jesus into his trap:  
and as he pushes further,  
he reveals what is truly in his heart  
by asking,  
*well, then who is my neighbor?*

It is like when you tell your children,  
don't touch anything  
at your great grandmother's house  
and they fire back with the sassy,  
well then where can I sit?

When the lawyer asks, who is my neighbor,  
he is essentially asking,  
*who is that I do **not***  
*have to show the divine love toward?*  
*Who can I ignore*  
*and who can I leave out of my circle?²*

Thus—and I just don't get to say **thus** enough,  
thus, Jesus begins one of the most famous New Testament stories,  
a parable of a wounded man  
and three attempts to right by a neighbor.



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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pg. 93

There is a rule of three  
that works really well in stories.

An expected, successful outcome is projected  
by two previous failed attempts.

Think the Three Little Pigs:  
if the first house of straw falls,  
and second the house of sticks blows over  
then surely, we expect  
the third house of bricks stand by  
the hairs of his chinny, chin, chin.

Even three characters work well together:

how about if say,  
Larry, Moe and....?

Okay this one is harder  
what if I say  
...the lost sheep,  
the lost coin,  
the lost...(son).

*(Some of you have been paying attention/  
that was from earlier this winter  
when we looked at the parable of the Prodigal Son.)*

You see Jesus uses this method,  
even for his own stories:  
the man who had 100 sheep  
and lost the one,  
the woman who had 10 coins  
and lost one,  
are the set up for the man  
who had two sons  
and lost one.

The rule of three in story telling  
is that the first two act as a  
set up for the third.

It's a build up of expectation and  
a good storyteller knows this.

So Jesus sets up the story:

a man is going down from Jerusalem  
back to Jericho.

All Jews go up to Jerusalem,  
(no matter the actual direction)  
so, when Jesus says that this man is going down,  
then we can assume (if he is Jewish)  
he has been to the Temple and has fulfilled  
his duties for his faith and his family.

Whatever he has done in Jerusalem,  
it is finished and he is now headed in  
another direction.  
But on the way  
he is beaten and robbed  
and left for dead.

It just so happens that a priest  
was also going down from Jerusalem,  
so, this means he too  
has done whatever he needs to do at the Temple  
and no longer needs to worry  
about being ritually clean or pure  
—*and that is important.*  
He sees the half-dead man,  
and he passes by on the other side.

And then along comes a Levite  
—another priest of sorts—  
and he is also going the same direction,  
coming down,  
so, he no longer needs to worry  
about ritual cleanliness either.

But the Levite, seeing the man lying there,  
passes by on the other side as well.

Now, typically we,  
Christians,  
have interpreted the story

with incorrect assumptions  
about Jewish purity laws as good excuses  
for why the priest and Levite  
ignore the beaten man.

But the direction of travel is Luke's way telling us  
that they wouldn't have had to worry  
about those laws and codes.

And we have wrongly assumed that purity codes and rules  
would outweigh the covenant imperative  
to take care of one another.

“There is nothing impure  
about touching a person who is half dead.  
Nor is there any sin in burying a corpse.”

*(Should the priest and Levite have thought he was dead)*

The Babylonian Talmud

—a collection of rabbinic interpretations  
on the Torah written  
while the Jews were in Babylon in exile  
is very clear,

“As long as there are no other people  
to look after the burial of the corpse,  
the duty is incumbent  
on the first Jew that passes by,  
without exception,  
to perform the burial.”<sup>3</sup>

The Torah, the law, expects Jews  
to act in justice, kindness and mercy  
—and what we have in our story  
are two men who fail to act.<sup>4</sup>

And how often are we guilty  
of the same sin:  
of failing to act?

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, pg. 101

<sup>4</sup> *ibid* pg. 101



So if the priest and Levite fail to act, then who is next?  
Jesus is building up to the third person  
who will come down the road.

The expectation is  
that this third person  
will do that right thing,  
since the priest and Levite have not.

And so of course everyone is expecting  
to hear that the third person to pass by  
would **a)** do the right thing  
and **b)** would be an Israelite.

So as the expectation  
builds for an Israelite  
to act in love, justice, kindness and mercy,  
Jesus has his own trick  
because instead of an Israelite,  
Jesus says a Samaritan passed by  
and has compassion for the beaten man.

Jews and Samaritans don't get along.

I'm understating years of animosity here.

They don't just not like each other.

Their hatred goes a long way back  
—back to when the united Davidic kingdom split  
into the Northern and Southern kingdoms.

When the Southern Kingdom  
declared its capital and holy place  
as Jerusalem  
and the Northern Kingdom  
declared its capital and holy place as Samaria.

It's an old axe  
that's been grinding  
for hundreds of years.

Samaritans aren't just  
a group of people that Jews don't care for;  
they aren't these innocent neighbors  
who just believe differently.

This isn't just Presbyterians and Baptists  
who disagree about baptism  
this is the Catholic and Protestants  
in Dublin on Bloody Sunday.

This is Civil War era slave-holding Southerners  
and abolitionist freedom-fighting Northerners.

This is Pro-choice and Pro-life  
protestors who get out of control.

These are groups of people  
who dislike and hate each other enough  
to be violent, to go to war, to kill.

In this story, Samaritans  
aren't seen [as] oppressed  
but kind and benevolent figures,  
they are [an] enemy  
—the ones doing the oppressing.<sup>5</sup>

Teacher and leading Jewish New Testament scholar  
Amy-Jill Levine explains that to a Jewish audience  
and Luke's readers,  
hearing about a, 'good Samaritan'  
would make no more sense  
than the idea of 'good rapist.'  
It's as if Jesus told a story about  
a preacher, a soup kitchen director and  
a 'good serial killer.'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, pg.104

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, pg.105

Like whoa. Full stop.

What does it mean  
to have 'the criminal,'  
the oppressor, the enemy *stop*,  
and show love, kindness, justice,  
and mercy?

This isn't just prejudice,  
this is seeing the one we hate,  
the one we loathe,  
the one we can't imagine having an ounce of compassion,  
lifting us out of death and injury.



It's the black woman  
who stops to help the white supremacist  
lying in the ditch  
wearing his bloodied, confederate flag t-shirt  
and white hood.  
It's a Samaritan's Purse worker walks on by;  
a UN Aid Worker who walks past;  
and finally, a young Muslim  
who has just been working on a car bomb  
stops and shows mercy:

I can't even exactly paint the picture,  
because we all hate different people.

How awful is it to even say that?

Who is my neighbor?

And I can't exactly paint the picture  
because we have let ourselves believe  
the lie,  
the sin,  
that there are irrevocable differences  
between us and them  
...whoever *them* might be.

Who is my neighbor?

We've let ourselves believe  
the lie and  
the sin  
that I am only responsible  
for myself and my own family  
and no one else.

Who is my neighbor?

And if it weren't shocking enough,  
to fathom the term, good terrorist, or good murderer,  
as the one who shows mercy—  
then chew on the fact  
that when Jesus tells the story,  
he tells it revealing the enemy  
as the one who acts like God.

He ends his story.

*Which of these three, does it seem to you, was the neighbor?*

Jesus pushes:

wanting the lawyer, the listeners, us  
to admit it out loud—

**he is asking a question he already knows the answer to:**

*which of these three—does it seem to you—  
was a neighbor to the one  
who fell among the robbers?*

Martin Luther King Jr.  
preached a sermon  
on the Good Samaritan  
pushing us to reexamine  
how we answer, *who is my neighbor*:

“I’m going to tell you  
what my imagination tells me.  
It’s possible these men were afraid  
...and so, the first question the priest  
[and] Levite ask, was  
‘If I stop to help this man,  
what will happen to me?’

...But then the [Good] Samaritan came by,  
and he reversed the question:  
“If I do not stop to help this man,  
what will happen to him?”<sup>7</sup>

Who is my neighbor?

That is the question  
our faith demands we ask ourselves.  
To answer to each other,  
in our neighborhoods  
and on the other side of the tracks  
inside our city limits and out in the countryside,  
within the borders of our country  
and just outside of them  
—who is our neighbor,  
and what will happen to them,  
if we fail to do the right thing?

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pg. 102 from King’s “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech:  
<https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2012/04/why-didnt-they-stop-martin-luther-king-jr-on-the-parable-of-the-good-samaritan/>

One more story, and this one  
is a folk tale from Burma:



Long ago a traveler  
was walking through the jungles of Burma  
when he came upon a small village.  
As the sun was going down,  
he decided to just sleep along the roadside  
and enter the village in the morning.  
Taking his coin purse from around his neck,  
he found a stone nearby  
and hid his purse  
so, no one would take it as he slept.  
As it turned out,  
a villager had spotted him  
hiding the purse.  
Late that night the villager stole the purse.

When the traveler awoke, the money was gone.

The traveler sat down beside the road  
and began to weep.  
A crowd gathered,  
curious about this distraught traveler  
on the edge of the village.  
Before long  
the mayor joined the crowd  
and inquired about the situation.  
He listened to the traveler  
and then asked to see the stone.

The traveler walked a short distance  
to a round stone  
about the size of a man's head.

The mayor ordered, "Arrest that stone.  
Bring that thief to the town square  
where I'll convene a court."

The villagers followed the mayor  
and the traveler to the town square.  
Once the village elders were in place,  
the mayor convened the court.

The mayor asked the stone,  
"What is your name?"

The stone was silent.

The mayor leaned forward  
closer to the stone and demanded,  
"Where did you come from?"

More silence.

"Well at least tell me your age."

By this time some of the villagers  
were casting glances at each other.

Small smiles and puzzled looks  
were on the faces of the villagers.

The mayor pushed his face closer to the stone.

"So, you don't want to speak up?

Tell me, why were you loitering  
outside our village?"

The villagers began to cover their mouths  
to muffle their laughter.

"So, were you looking for trouble?"

Some of the villagers

could not contain themselves any longer;  
they let out a laugh.

The mayor turned to the crowd  
and declared,  
"Show some respect. This is a court of law."

The mayor turned back to the stone.  
"You will not answer my questions,  
so, I hold you in contempt of court.  
In punishment, you will receive  
thirty lashes with a stick."

The people could no longer contain themselves.  
They let out uproarious laughter.  
The mayor turned to them saying,  
"Have you no respect for this court?  
I fine every one of you a coin a piece."

One by one  
the villagers came forward  
and dropped a coin in a bowl  
in front of the mayor.  
The mayor then gave the coins to the traveler  
and apologized for the crime  
that had been committed  
outside of the village.  
The traveler's eyes filled with tears,  
for what he had lost  
had been restored.

The mayor wished the traveler well  
and ordered the stone  
to be returned to the place  
where it was found.

People talked about this trial  
for some time.  
Some thought the mayor acted foolishly,  
but most admitted  
the mayor acted with great wisdom.

Every time the villagers  
walk past the stone,  
they are reminded that they share the burdens  
of one another  
and all who pass their way.<sup>8</sup>

Who is our neighbor,  
and what will happen to them,  
if we fail to do the right thing?

Who is my neighbor?  
The answer will surprise you.

This is more than a story  
of unexpected kindness.  
It is more than just doing one thing  
for eternal life.

It is a story where the one we least expect,  
the one we hate  
the one we refuse to love  
is the one who acts like God.

Which one of these was the neighbor?

Who is the one who showed  
love, justice, kindness, and mercy?

Have you ever asked a question  
you already knew the answer to?

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<sup>8</sup> The Rev. Canon David Lovelace, [http://day1.org/7302-there\\_are\\_no\\_bystanders](http://day1.org/7302-there_are_no_bystanders)