

Asking the Wrong Question

²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must **I do** to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶He said to him, “What is written in the law? What **do you** read there?” ²⁷He 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.” ²⁸And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; **do this**, and you will **live**.”

You have given the right answer.

The lawyer answered Jesus correctly
when Jesus asked what do you read there;
he just didn't start out asking the right question.¹



Aside from Luke's not so-subtle hint
that the point of all this is to test Jesus,
the lawyer's first mistake
was asking the wrong question:
asking what he must **do**,
implies a single action,
not an ongoing relationship with others
or way of living.

Jesus tips off the lawyer by saying,
do what you just told me
is the law of our people
and you will live.

Not **do** what you just told me is the law of our people
and you will inherit eternal life.

Not **do** what you just told me
and you will get into heaven
with express check-in.

Not even **do** what you've just told me

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (HarperOne, New York 2014) pg.90

for some future salvation.
Jesus doesn't mention eternal life at all.
He says to, "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,"
that is the correct answer—
for life,
for living,
for the right here and now.

And that's where this all should have stopped.
The lawyer should have thanked Jesus
and gone home.²
But that would not have been a
noteworthy story for Luke.

He starts with the wrong question.
Then the second mistake.

²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Again, the wrong question.

"To ask who is my neighbor?
is a polite way of asking,
'Who is *not* my neighbor?'
or 'Who does not deserve my love?'
or 'Whose lack of food and shelter can I ignore?'
or 'Whom can I hate?'"³

When Jesus starts his story,
we think this will be a good story
about being neighborly.

² Ibid, pg.90

³ Ibid, pg.93

But that's not it.
We already know
that the lawyer and the crowd
knew how the law was to be read,
how it was to be interpreted.
Jews didn't ignore
all the other 613 mitzvot or commandments—
—this love commandment
that combines two commands—
(“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.”)
this love commandment
is **the touchstone** by which all other actions
are held to in the Jewish faith.⁴
So, Jews didn't need a parable
about loving their neighbors
—they knew that already.
Their faith commanded hospitality to the stranger.
They knew how love neighbor.⁵

So, what Jesus does,
is not just tell a story about being neighborly.
He is clever and cunning.
I love when things are clever.
You've heard me say before
my favorite book of poetry
is cleverly titled,
What Narcissism Means to Me.

I love the humor of the time
when Will and Tabitha Clark
got me a cookie cake for my birthday,
with the words,
Nothing Else Matters,
written on it in frosting.

⁴ Ibid, pg. 89

⁵ Ibid. pg. 80



I love humor that pokes healthy fun
because it can be witty and biting.

So, when Luke has Jesus begin this story,
we should be looking for it
to have an element of the clever,
the cunning, the slight bite of healthy humor;
we should look for this story to
be impact us in a big way.

³⁰Jesus 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. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He 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. ³⁵The 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.’

A Samaritan.

If Jews don't need a parable
about loving neighbor as self,
then why this parable?

Why a Samaritan?

How are we to place ourselves in this
to hear Jesus' declaration
about life and kingdom and good news?



Well first there is the set up.

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

An expected, successful outcome
is predicated 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
to stand by the hairs of a pig's chinny, chin, chin.

Even three characters work well together:

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

Okay this one is harder:

what if we use Luke's parables,
he tells one about...the lost sheep,
the lost coin,
the lost...(son).⁶

So, Jesus sets his story up
with the rule of three.

If a priest and then a Levite fail to act,
the crowd is expecting an Israelite—
in other words, a common Jewish traveler,
a Mary Ruth or a Miriam
or a Benjamin or Rueben to be next.

We like to chide the Levite and the priest
for not stopping.

Or think of excuses around purity
that would have kept them

⁶ibid, pg.

from acting on the wounded man's behalf.
But have there been times
when you have failed to act?

When you've passed by someone in need
and then felt this lingering sense of nagging
that you should have stopped?
Should have done something?
Or have you been in a social situation,
let's say a dinner with friends
and someone makes a veiled racist comment
or slightly sexist joke,
but you don't say anything
because you aren't really sure
you want to be the one to call any one out?

Have you ever failed to act too?

So why a Samaritan?
Because of the title,
we often think of this Samaritan
as a benevolent figure;
we call the story,
the Good Samaritan.

Scholar and professor, AJ Levine writes,
but in Jesus's context,
For Jesus's listeners
to say Good Samaritan
meant we could easily say,
this is a story of the Good Murderer.
This is the story of the Good Nazi
or the good child abuser.
It's as if Jesus told a story about a preacher,
a soup kitchen director
and a good serial killer.

That is the kind of weight
the name Samaritan carried.
Those whom we might consider, irredeemable.



But here is the clever gut punch of Jesus.

Remember how the lawyer

asked the wrong question?

How asking, 'who is my neighbor?'

is basically asking,

'who can I ignore,

who can I hate?

Jesus turns that question,

'who is my neighbor?'

back to the lawyer,

back to the crowd,

back to us.

He gives a story about with two failed outcomes

all the while building the expectation

that the third attempt would succeed

only to find it succeeds

with scandal.

³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" ³⁷He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Who is my neighbor?

Wrong question.

Which one of these three,
do you think was a neighbor?

The minister?

The non-profit director?

The child-abuser?

Scandalous question.

It is easy for us to read this story and say,

well, the point is

to be the one who helps a neighbor.

Yes, but would you really need Jesus

to illustrate that with a story?

I mean don't we already know that from our faith, too?

Now, I'd like to ask us,

a clever question.

Within the framework of a lawyer

who knows the Torah,

knows that what is required

of him as a faithful Jew;

within the framework of a man

who wants **not** to define

but actually narrow

the parameters of the neighbor

that he is supposed to love

just like he loves himself

...within all that...

within the context of Jesus

turning that question on its head

and asking the lawyer, the crowd listening,

asking us (!)

...to name the despised;

to name the scandalous one

as the who acted like a neighbor,

I'd like to ask that same question,

in a different way.

Let's turn this question,

this wrong question

of "who is my neighbor?"

let's turn it

and ask it the way Jesus might have:

If we want to know,

how we might live,

not what we must **do**
in order to inherit eternal life,
(after all we know that is the wrong question too)
but if we want to know
how we might read and interpret the scriptures,
to know how we are **to live now**,
as those who believe in Christ—
we might ask this question:
“how big is our “we?”⁷

How big is our collective, we?

How big do we,
draw the circle of who God loves
—how large to do we make that circle for God?
How big is our we?

Because I what I’m reading here with Jesus,
is that our “we,”
our parameters for neighbor;
for loving each other like we love ourselves
is likely not big enough.

Who is my neighbor?
It is the wrong question,

When turned around and asked correctly,
Is there anyone who is not my neighbor?
Jesus gives us the answer,
“No one.”

Everyone deserves love and mercy
experienced in this life now
—local or immigrant,
Jew or gentile,
friend or enemy,

⁷ Beatrice Bruteau, “Deep Ecology and Generic Spirituality,” *Silence in the Midst of Noise: An Ecumenical Approach to Contemplative Prayer*, ed. Beatrice Bruteau and James Somerville (Pfafttown, NC: Philosopher’s Exchange, 1990), 105.

murderer or terrorist.
It stinks to even say it.

David Young,
the visiting minister from Scotland,
who was here several years ago
had this up on FB this week.

The test of
Christianity is
not loving Jesus,
it's loving Judas.

- George Woodruff
TheHappyGivers.com

How do we read this story
of the Samaritan
who acted with love and mercy,
who acted as neighbor?

This quotes asks us,
how do we read
the scandal of who Jesus is
and what he does?

Jesus gives us the answer to that question.
Do this, and you will live.