

The Right Answer

sermon digest

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Luke 10:25-37; Ephesians 2:11-20

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We continue this morning our Lenten journey reflecting on the temptations of Jesus. More than just a moment on a far removed mountaintop at the beginning of his ministry, the first three Gospels tell a story in which testing and temptation dog Jesus' every step. The challenge of taking short cuts, of cultivating favor by passing out favors, of appeasing the powers-that-be, and of resorting to the spectacular is not a one-time occurrence. It is with him every step of the way. This morning we turn to one of many occasions in which someone comes to Jesus to "test" him on his grasp of Torah. As we have told the story over the years, we have tended to deride the challenger and the religious heritage from which he speaks. He is there, we have been quick to agree, not to learn, but to trick Jesus and get him in trouble with the authorities. This morning, let's take a slightly different tack. Seeking to read the story in the context of first century Judaism rather than in opposition to it, let's look at it in terms of an exercise that would not have been unfamiliar to the day. Let's look at it in terms of the common practice of the respected schools of rabbis or teachers of the day coming together to deliberate over the meaning of the Torah. Let's look at it in terms of devotees of scripture coming together seeking to plumb its depths.

The story of the lawyer coming to Jesus to inquire about the first or greatest commandment is reported in each of the first three Gospels, although in Luke it is told a bit differently. In Luke, the lawyer comes wanting to know what he must do to inherit eternal life, and Jesus turns the question back to him: "How do you read? How do you interpret the teaching of Torah?" In the other two Gospels, it is Jesus who identifies the two great commandments; in Luke it is the lawyer: Love God and love your neighbor. "You have given the right answer;" Jesus assures him, "do this, and you will live."

In Luke, the story does not end with the right answer. In Luke, the lawyer goes on to raise yet one more question: "And who is my neighbor?" Agreement on the first two commandments, though still perhaps a matter of discussion, was not something new in first century Judaism. Others had taken that step. The question of neighbor, however, was something else. Still very much in dispute, it was actually a question in the negative: "Who is *not* my neighbor. Where can I set limits on the extent of my responsibilities?" Not unlike other teachers of his day, Jesus then takes the step of telling a story to make his point: the story we call "the Good Samaritan." You remember it. As a matter of fact, it is so familiar to us that we are in danger of missing its message. We are so familiar with it that we fail to read it in context. We fail to read it on its own rather than in light of the two commandments that have just gone before it. Making it about simple goodness, we put the focus on the "good" Samaritan and chide ourselves to be "good." But is that all there is to it? Is it just about playing nice, being kind to strangers? Is it just about doing what any decent person might do in a situation, or is it about something more?

The key to interpreting Jesus' parables is in seeking to identify the story's central character. And true, our focus is usually on the "good" Samaritan and the challenge to go and do likewise. We usually spend a good bit of time spitting bullets about the priest and the Levite who pass on the other side of the road and their representation of religion gone bad. We may even talk at length about how the Samaritan represents a despised people and is the last person in the story anyone would be ready to categorize as "good." But we usually ignore the victim. After all, the only thing we are told about him is that he is "a certain man." Yet he is the only character in the story with whom all the other characters come into contact—an indication in storytelling etiquette of the day that the listener should identify with him. Since they have not been told otherwise, those overhearing Jesus' conversation with the lawyer, would naturally assume that the man in the road shares their own identity. He is a Jew; and as such, he is being placed in an enormously difficult situation. He is being asked to accept kindness in his hour of need from a Samaritan. *Everyone*, after all, knows what *they* are like. *Everyone* knows they are not to be trusted.

Unfortunately, our very familiarity with Jesus' parables removes us from their shock value. Jesus' parables are told to jolt his listeners into awareness. More than the ordinary pabulum into which we tend to make them, they bear a new and earthshaking message that shake people out of what they

have always comfortably believed. So here we are with the Jewish victim lying on the ground with no one lifting a finger to help him. Can he, can those hearing his story accept graciousness and become indebted to such a character as this *Samaritan*? And having received such kindness from one on whom one has absolutely no claim to expect such kindness, how does one respond? And what happens the next time one encounters a person who is similarly *othered* and in need of help? Might the one who has been victim and those who have heard his story discover a new capacity to empathize with and respond in compassion to those whose lives are unlike their own? “Just so,” John Crossan observes,

does the Kingdom of God break abruptly into a persons’ consciousness and demand the overturn of prior values, closed options, set judgments and established conclusions” [*Semeia* 1 (1974): 78; quoted in Frederick Borsch, *Many Things in Parables*, 65].

“ . . . the overturn of prior values, closed options, set judgments and established conclusions . . . ” Jesus’ parables and truly, the teaching of the Torah is just that. “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 [if you do that, Jesus and the Torah seem to agree, you will love] your neighbor as yourself.”

The focus of Jesus’ parable is not on the object of one’s love, i.e., the neighbor, but on the subject of love. It is not upon whipping up within ourselves the will to love. It is the enabled response of having been loved first by God. “We love,” I John tells us, “because he first loved us” (4:19). And, “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (4:10). “Remember,” the epistle to the Ephesians tells us, “that at one time you . . . were . . . aliens and strangers, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near. . . . So you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God” (2:11-20).

The question becomes then, Robert Funk insists, not “*who is my neighbor*, but *who am I?*” The secret of the parable and the crux of the entire Christian message is just this: do we see ourselves as the unmerited recipients of God’s love, loved not because of our nationality, family heritage, political persuasion, economic bracket, or the color of our skin? How far must our answering love go? Who can we exclude? Responding to our question as he responded to that of the lawyer, Jesus responds,

If you knew what love means, you would not have asked the question. I asked you how you read, and you answered with the right words; now I ask you whether you understand—and your answer is your life. [“How Do You Read?” Interpretation, 1964]

Making Jesus’ parables about those guys back then and their shortcomings misses the point. The Samaritans and Jews of the first century had their issues, but so do we. Our post 9-11 world and the global economic crisis have brought us up short. As our future, our place in the world has become less certain, our shaken confidence makes us want to constrict our outlook and limit the breadth of our concern and responsibilities. We find ourselves thinking in terms of national borders and the financial security of our families. As frustrating as it is, here in the midst of *our* sense of alienation and crisis, not just in the midst of the alienation and crisis of the first century, the open hand of hospitality is in danger of becoming the closed hand of a clinched fist.

“Everything,” we say, “changed on 9-11.” “Everything changed when the markets crashed.” And in many ways it did. But as Christians, we are called to reflect on another beginning point: “Having experienced the wonder of Christian love,” we say in our Covenant, “our faith in God proceeds from the confession of early Christians, ‘God is love’ (I Jn 4:8) We believe that God was in Christ reconciling the world” (2 Cor. 5:19).” Our point of beginning is not the tragedy and alienation of our world. Our point of beginning is the example of a God who came into the midst of our tragedy and alienation for the sake of making us whole.

Our purpose and the purpose of any who would act as the Body of Christ is to take our place in the story. Our purpose is to embody the reconciling, healing love of God in Christ. In a world that has grown increasingly guarded and harsh, we are called to imitate the “table manners,” Paul Waddel suggests, of Jesus. We are called to be sacraments—visible evidences, physical bearers of God’s gracious love [Christian Reflection: Hospitality, 2007].

So, who is my neighbor? How far does my responsibility reach? Our Covenant seems to get it just

about right: "We will cast our vision to the ends of the earth in celebration of the universal presence, love and revelation of God to the whole human family."

"Love God," Jesus said; and "love your neighbor."