

Becoming a Neighbor

The secret for understanding a parable is to notice the little surprises that are always there. I'm talking about the subtle logical quirks or twists in the plot that we might slide over. It's in these little surprises that the meaning lies. And today's parable, the Parable of the Good Samaritan, is both loaded with surprises and so familiar that we've long ago ceased to expect anything surprising. The easy reading is to race to the application: help people in need. But if we leave it at that we miss too much.

For example, the lawyer's whole posture is ironic. The text tells us that he stood up to test Jesus. This is hardly the attitude of a student who in those days sat at the feet of the teacher. The teacher tested the student. The teacher asked the questions rather than the other way around. So right off there's something funny here.

"What must I do to inherit," is his question. Of course, inheritances are gifts given to family members. You get an inheritance by being a family member not by doing. So more funny business.

Jesus wisely detects something tricky about this line of questioning and instead of offering an answer that can be criticized, he returns a question, "What is written in the Law?" If you have your Bibles open and you scan the entire parable

including this dialogue with the lawyer you'll notice that it is structured entirely around questions and answers. Except for the very last phrase, "Go and do likewise," Jesus only asks questions. Even the whole story of the Good Samaritan is a preface to a question, "Who proved to be neighbor to the man?" What I take from this clearly well-crafted structure is an extremely sophisticated movement from the lawyer's religion of rules and ideas to a religion of relationship and action.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. The text goes on saying that the lawyer wanted to justify himself. That's a significant choice of words. Elsewhere in the New Testament the expression "justify" is about the same thing as being "saved." The quirky little surprise in the story's use of the word, "justify" is that there's a hint here that the lawyer is trying to prove himself acceptable in God's eyes through this little debate he's having with Jesus. His attitude is "I've spent my lifetime thinking through these questions, 'what is the meaning of faith? what is righteousness? what are the right answers? what are the right opinions? what kinds of people are God's favorites?' In a debate, I can pretty much blow away this crackpot from Galilee. And if I win a debate or a little exchange with him, I can walk away smugly thinking myself pretty much having arrived in the

truth." The lawyer wanted to justify himself so he asked Jesus...

So the lawyer has his follow-up question ready practically before Jesus stops talking. And...who is my neighbor? Let's define the terms. Clearly, the lawyer is familiar with the contours of this debate. He well knows that back in the Old Testament book of Leviticus, 19.18 to be precise, it reads:

You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

That text would imply that the neighbor is limited to someone who is a son of our own people. The lawyer also knows that later in the chapter, 19.34 to be precise, the text seems to contradict itself in stating:

The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

The lawyer's calculation is that Jesus might not have these two texts at his command and will be in for an embarrassing debate surprise if he fumbles. "So, ah, Jesus...(the lawyer's eyes squint slyly as he moves in for the rhetorical kill)...who is my neighbor?"

Now, I can't emphasize how brilliant Jesus is in bringing light to this situation. He tells a story. How did he have such a cool story ready? I don't know. How did he manage to

craft it on the fly so that it ingeniously shines a whole new light on the conversation and even helps us. I can't account for any of that. But it happens.

A man falls victim to robbers and lies half-dead at the side of the road. A priest comes by. We can assume that the priest—a wealthy member of a hereditary guild—was riding an animal, and having an animal, has the means to help a helpless person. Unfortunately, the priest has some problems. He has a religious duty to help a fellow Jew according to Leviticus 19 which we have reviewed. But is the bleeding figure a Jew? He is naked remember, stripped of the very clothing that would have distinguished him from an Egyptian, Greek, Syrian, or Phoenician.

What's more, he is, as the text puts it, "half dead," which is to say that he may have appeared to be all dead. If the priest touches him only to discover that he was messing with a corpse, he will have rendered himself ceremonially defiled. Without spending time describing the purity laws in ancient Israel, if a priest becomes ritually unclean, he would have had to pre-arrange a week-long process of ceremonial purification. During that time he couldn't draw his salary nor eat of the food provided for priests. And if he tried to just kind of forget about his ritual condition and serve at the Temple altar

ritually unclean he could have been punished with death! Love your neighbor, love your shnabor. It is all too risky. That priest moves right on down the road.

Okay, here comes a Levite. These were assistants to the priests. It's likely that he knew that his boss was riding ahead of him. If the boss didn't help the victim—who was now drawing flies—that precedent would be good enough reason in itself for the Levite not to get involved. So the Levite kicks his animal and trots on by.

Jesus is telling this story to the lawyer and on-lookers. And if they're even half thinking, they're seeing themselves and their idea of religious faithfulness cast in high relief. What they're seeing is organized, professionalized, institutionalized religion gone to seed. The simple command to love your neighbor is now all gummed up with theological considerations and liturgical considerations, so that the more faithful course comes to appear to these religious professionals to be to *not* love the neighbor.

Comes now the Samaritan. Samaritans we've all heard were hated by Jews. Unencumbered by complications of ritual and biblical interpretation, the Samaritan's creed is the Nike motto: "Just do it." And he does. The more we ponder the Samaritan helping the half-dead Jew the more wonderful it gets.

He lingers to help in robber infested territory. He has to get all kinds of supplies out of the saddlebags: cloth, oil, wine. His beast of burden, a donkey I'd guess, is utilized. The Samaritan has to venture into a Jewish settlement in order to find an inn. He spends a night himself with the victim.

There is danger for the Samaritan in all of this. Don't forget Samaritans were hated, hated by Jews. So this Samaritan risks attack by Jews. What is he doing with a half-dead Jewish man draped across his animal?

There's more. It's a little known fact that if inn guests failed to pay their bills, the innkeeper could have them sold into slavery. So the Samaritan makes a goodly deposit of money to insure that this doesn't happen to the wounded man. Think about it, the Samaritan could have dropped the body of the Jewish victim at the edge of town, to be found by his own people, and still be dubbed the "good Samaritan."

So Jesus tells this story which concludes with a question. "Who, then, is the neighbor?" Here's a cool example of Jesus not only answering a question with a question, but answering a question with the same question. So, who is the neighbor?

Now, I think that this question is the subtlest and most interesting of all. Who is the neighbor? It's not answered by trying to figure out what kinds of categories of people you have

to help. Do we have to help Jews, Christians, countrymen, family members, who? It's answered by wondering who might be neighbor to me. Neighbor runs two ways. If my neighbor is my neighbor, I'm also his neighbor. That's so obvious that we miss it. But Jesus plays on it. "Hey, lawyer; don't ask who you are legally obligated to help at the side of the road. How about, who just might scoop up your sorry carcass when you're half dead and helpless. That's your neighbor."

I hope that the next time I'm wondering if someone is a Christian or not; or when I'm in one of those conversations that tries to determine if someone's ideas are heretical, I hope that I remember the lawyer and his trick questions. I hope that when I get into that who's in and who's out kind of thinking that Christians get into, that I'll remember the priest's incredibly beside-the-point calculations as he pondered the beaten man from 25 feet away. And when I get to feeling a kind of smarmy pride over my opinions and position in life, my Presbyterian heritage, my background, my education, I hope I'll remember the Samaritan who was thought to be wrong about everything, who was treated as useless, and from the wrong side of the tracks. I hope I'll remember that everything he did was right, and more, how he bore an uncanny resemblance to the generosity and life of Jesus—who is ever and always our neighbor.