

## The Good Samaritan

If you've asked yourself "what does God expect of me?", today is your day. If you've wondered "am I doing what he wants?", today is your day. Too often we try to complicate it all. "Am I believing exactly the right thing?" "Have I followed the rules?" "Have I done the rituals properly?" We love to complicate what God has made so simple.

The prophet Micah said it: What does God require but that you love kindness and act justly and walk humbly with your God.

And that is the truth that Jesus picks up today, when he is face to face with (horror of horrors!) a lawyer who is also a priest! Some days, it seems, the readings just love to punch me in the nose!

As one of those lawyer/priests, I can tell you --- we love to do just what my brother lawyer/priest did. We love to test. We love to push. We love to poke. And most of all, we love to justify ourselves. And this lawyer/priest who confronts Jesus today continues that proud tradition!

The first question is a common one: "How am I saved?" Jesus doesn't answer. He turns the question back on the questioner, who give the right answer. "Love God with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself. And Jesus tells him: "Yes, do that."

Except it's impossible to actually do that. None of them, none of us, love God with all that we are, nor do we love our neighbor that way. And something deep inside that lawyer/priest *knew it*. He just knew it. So he asked the next question: "Who is my neighbor?"

Now, for those of you who are neither lawyers nor priests, this question has to be translated. It is a question asked in lawyer-speak. What he was really getting at was this: "Who's in?" and "Who's out?" "To what limited group of people must I extend myself?" And, "who can I safely ignore?" Those are questions we ask to this very day.

They are the same questions that are at the root of what divides Protestants and Catholics, Jews and Muslims, people of different races, genders and sexual orientation. "Who's in?" and "Who's out?"

So Jesus, the master storyteller, tells the lawyer/priest the story we all know so well. A man, we don't know his name, his character, or his history, gets mugged on the very dangerous road from Jerusalem down to Jericho. Some in the crowd likely thought he had it coming. No one in their right mind walked that route alone! It's like walking down Kalakaua Ave some Friday night at 2 a.m. You're asking for trouble!

He's left for dead. But wait! Here comes a priest! Help has arrived! Except, oops, nope, it hasn't. The priest walks on by. Next a Levite, the tribe who assists in Temple worship.

I want to share this story with you. A theology professor some years back had all his students prepare a sermon on the Good Samaritan. They did so. On their way to class that day, all of them ready to deliver their sermon, the professor had arranged for an actor to pretend he was bleeding and beaten, lying on the side of the college road where the students walked to class. All of the students had their sermons in hand. All of the students had to walk by the apparently injured man. Not one of them stopped.....Not one.

So how about that Levite who came upon the injured man in Jesus' story? Will he help? Nope.

In those days, stories were told in threes. And as Jesus was telling his story, the people listening probably expected a third passerby. And they likely expected him to be a regular Jewish person. And the moral of the story would be that a regular Jew did the right thing while the pious mucky mucks didn't. That's what the crowd was waiting for. That's what the crowd expected.

But there goes Jesus again, being Jesus, and totally blowing everyone's mind. I don't think we have a parallel today to get at the kick in the gut Jesus delivered when the third man turned out to be a Samaritan.

Maybe a radical Muslim extremist would come close. In the '50's, maybe a communist. In the 30's, maybe a Nazi. You see, the Jewish people loathed the Samaritans. And the Samaritans loathed the Jews right back. Only 20 years before Jesus told this story, a bunch of Samaritans dug up

human bodies, tore the bones apart, and scattered those bones in the Holy of Holies in the Temple at Jerusalem. How's that?!

Jesus completes his story of three, and the third man to come by is the hated Samaritan. He gathers up the wounded man, tends to his injuries and leaves enough money with the Innkeeper for a stay of 24 days. The hated Samaritan is not only compassionate, he is kind and he is generous.

There's an old saying: "There are no stupid questions," but, I think that is true only when the person doing the asking is sincere in his asking. The lawyer/priest today was not sincere when he asked Jesus: "Who is my neighbor?" He was, instead, trying to justify himself. So Jesus treated his question as a stupid question.

He treated it as a stupid question by completely ignoring the question. Because when Jesus got done with his shocking story of the Samaritan, Jesus asked the priest/lawyer a very different question. Not "who is my neighbor", as if I could point out neighbors like so many rocks or trees or things, turning neighbors in objects. No. The question Jesus asked is: "Which of the three was neighbor to the injured man?"

In short, "to whom, my dear lawyer/priest, are **you** a neighbor?" "To whom are **you** a neighbor?"

Jesus is cajoling us today to open our eyes and see that our task is not to identify neighbors, *but to be neighbors*. It is a particular challenge to his clergy, who can get so wrapped up in the theory that we forget the practice. A lesson those seminary students probably never forgot.

The question Jesus asks is not: "Do you think the right things?"

Instead, he asks, "will you do the right things?"

The answer will only be known when you and I come across the next person in need.

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