

Of the four, Luke's gospel is my favorite because I consider Luke to be the superior storyteller. It's a matter of opinion, of course, but it's Luke's memorable characters who have made it into the everyday vocabulary even of people who don't practice the Christian faith or read the bible. You don't have to have graduated from Sunday school to have heard someone referred to as a Prodigal Son or a Good Samaritan. Did you ever notice that Luke didn't call the son "prodigal" or the Samaritan "good"...

This famously misnamed parable is really a story within a story. First we read that an expert in the law, that is, God's law as recorded in the Old Testament, stands up to test Jesus: not an honest question, not genuine curiosity, but a test, a trick, a gotcha. Remember who else tested Jesus? The devil in the wilderness after his baptism. The expert calls Jesus "Teacher" which sounds nice, but the more respectful title in the gospels is "Lord." *What must I do to inherit eternal life?* Jesus doesn't give an answer but asks another question: *What is written in the law? How do you understand it?* The expert answers by combining a verse from Deuteronomy and a verse from Leviticus: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind and your neighbor as yourself*, which Jesus says is the right answer. Isn't it interesting how often we hear people make claims about what "good" or "true" Christians have to avoid—negative prohibitions, *do not's*. But these are *must do's*—positive responsibilities, which are really much harder than just avoiding bad things, because they point to work that is never done. The sense is of ongoing action: *keep on loving God and keep on loving your neighbor as yourself, and you will continue to live*—an echo of the promise in our first reading today. It's not a once and done box to be checked but continuous action that links loving God to loving the neighbor. There is no version of Christianity that allows us to come in here on Sunday morning and claim we love God then go out there and not love our neighbor.

*But wanting to vindicate himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"* If you have ever parented a child, taught a student, or chaperoned a camper, you've heard a version of that clarifying question after giving instructions or setting a rule: what is the bare minimum that still counts as compliance? Again, Jesus avoids a direct answer and instead tells a story:

*A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and was robbed, stripped, beaten, and left half dead. A priest going down that road saw him and passed by on the other side. A Levite saw him and passed by. But a Samaritan saw him and was moved with compassion. He went to him, bandaged his wounds, put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, took care of him, gave the innkeeper money to keep looking after him, and promised to repay any additional expenses.*

Much ink has been spilled explaining why the priest and Levite might have failed to help; many of those explanations are historically inaccurate, culturally illogical, or outright antisemitic, and in any event, speculative. And really, to the guy left half dead on the roadside,

their motivations for passing by don't really matter. For Jesus' purposes, these are two people who would have been expected to help, but didn't. Now, before we ever heard this story, we probably heard Goldilocks and the Three Bears and the Three Little Pigs, so we know that while the actions of the first two characters are predictably similar, the third in the series will be a surprise. Jesus' audience would have heard a priest, a Levite, and automatically expected the third character to be an Israelite, so for the hero of the story to be a *Samaritan* would have been not just surprising but appalling. Long standing religious, ethnic, and political disputes divided Samaria and Israel; and as is so often the case, because they had the same ancestors, a common history, and shared religious roots, the conflict between them was much more bitter and offensive than if they had been distant nations with little or nothing in common. A *compassionate Samaritan* would have sounded to Jesus' Israelite listeners like *compassionate Confederate* would have sounded to a Union soldier during our Civil War. Or fill in that blank with your own favorite enemies, whatever group you love to hate.

The Samaritan—who the expert would have considered a bad guy—does what the priest and the Levite—presumably the good guys—failed to do: he helps the person in need with a real investment of time, energy, and resources. Whereas the expert in the law seems to be going out of his way to narrow down the definition of “neighbor” so he can justify loving fewer people, the Samaritan goes out of his way to help the naked, beaten, half-dead robbery victim, who would not be considered his neighbor according to any conservative definition, but who he makes a neighbor by his compassionate action.

*Which of the three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who was robbed?* The expert can't even bring himself to say the word *Samaritan*, but he does correctly identify *the one who showed him mercy*. And Jesus tells him *Go and do likewise*.

This is why we talk about Christianity being countercultural. Human institutions are pathologically devoted to drawing boundaries between people, to defining who is in and who is out, who is on the team and who is an enemy, who counts and who is expendable, who deserves compassion, mercy, dignity and the most basic human rights, and who can be deprived of those things and why. It's a way of looking at the world that doesn't just permit us to pass by on the other side but even disparages the one who shows us mercy when we're the ones in the ditch, convincing us that they must

be some kind of anomaly; after all, a *good Samaritan* implies that all the rest of the Samaritans are stereotypically bad. Jesus picks the most egregious enemy he can think of to teach the legal expert that our job is not to define who counts as our neighbor, so we can limit who we have to love, our job is to *be* a neighbor, and therefore expand our expectations of who we *get* to love. Instead of asking God, *Who is our neighbor?* may we be ready and willing when God asks us, *Are you going to love those people as you love yourselves?*