

July 10, 2016
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Luke 10:25-37

Trick Questions

The gospel of Luke is filled with well-known stories, great parables, many of them found only in this gospel. Perhaps none is more famous than the one we hear today, the parable of the Good Samaritan. It even has a category of laws named after it. Good Samaritan laws encourage people to help other people in danger—which is well in keeping with this parable. Here’s how Good Samaritan laws do this, though, this is a little tricky to explain. Good Samaritan laws offer protection to the helper—not to the victim, to the helper. Good Samaritan laws help protect a person from being sued if they are trying to help another person. The existence of these laws makes me want to make a derogatory comment about lawyers...and we have a few in our congregation!

As it happens, the parable of the Good Samaritan has a lawyer in it, though the lawyer may not be so well known, for he’s not in the parable itself, but he prompts telling of it. It should be noted that in the gospels the word “lawyer” is probably more accurately translated as “religious scholar.” In the gospels, lawyers are experts of the Jewish scriptures, they know the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, Genesis through Deuteronomy, front to back. In the preface to the parable, the lawyer stands up, somewhat suddenly, and asks Jesus a question, a great question: “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Another translation of this question is: “What must I do to have life in its eternal fullness?” Or “What must I do, to have a life of meaning, a life that endures?” What a great question.

The answer is great, too. This great answer is sometimes called the greatest commandment—and it’s found not only in Luke’s gospel: “Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, and soul, and with all your... love God with everything, and love your neighbor as yourself.” You can find this great commandment in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. You can find it in the first five books of the Bible, notably in Deuteronomy and Leviticus. You can find there the answer to how do you live a life of meaning, a life that endures? Answer: Love God and love neighbor. That great answer on how to live is all over the Bible, in the New and Old Testaments. However, it’s only here, in the gospel of Luke, that it’s not God who says it. In the Torah, it’s God saying it, giving the law to Moses. In the gospels other than Luke, it’s Jesus who says it, summarizing the law. It’s only here, right here in Luke, as an introduction to the parable of the Good Samaritan, that this great commandment is voiced by someone else: it’s in the mouth of the lawyer. The lawyer says it, recites it, at the invitation of Jesus, when Jesus says to him, “You know the law, what does it say? And the lawyer does know, the lawyer knows what to do to have life in its eternal fullness: love God and neighbor. “Great answer,” Jesus says. “Do it and live.”

But then the lawyer asks another question, “And who is my neighbor?” which sounds so very lawyerly. Lawyerly, I say, and yes, I’m being derogatory, noting the linguistic and legalistic loopholes and maneuverings that can attend that profession. The gospel text does say, after all, that the lawyer asked the question to justify himself. And it does have the sound of trick question, doesn’t it? You can almost picture the lawyer, pacing across the courtroom floor, suddenly turning to Jesus, who is sitting in the witness stand. The lawyer turns and asks Jesus: “And who is my neighbor? It’s like: “And where were you on the night of June 31st?” (There are only 30 days in June...) Or: What’s heavier: a ton of bricks or a ton of feathers?” (Which equivalent unit of measurement weighs more...)

That last trick question is probably even more familiar than the Parable of the Good Samaritan, which is what Jesus says in answer. Jesus answers “And who is my neighbor?” by telling a parable. Jesus answers, beginning with this: “A man.” A direct translation is “a certain

man,” which has the sense of “a guy.” No more specific than that, no more details are given about this guy at all, it’s just someone, could be anyone—a person, a person who went down a road. Literally went down. The road mentioned, the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, descends 3500 feet, down a dangerous road, that descent is well known for being steep, for having sharp turns, for being a place with cliffs and crevices and crannies, places where people could jump out and attack, rob, strip, beat.

Why was this person going down that road? Why does anyone go down dangerous roads? Do we choose those roads? Can we avoid them? Do we get what’s coming to us when we’re on them? When we are attacked, beaten, stripped, robbed, left half dead? That’s how the story describes this person, half-dead. Dangerous turns in life can do that to a person, can make one half-dead. And who is my neighbor? A person, a person in danger, a person whose odds are 50/50, no better than the flip of a coin.

Luckily, a priest walks by... but then keeps walking. But then another religious official walks by... and keeps walking. So much for my profession. But then another person walks by. We know who this person is, because we know the name of this parable: it’s the Good Samaritan. Do we know, though, the history and depth of animosity between Samaritans and Jews? Both Jews and Samaritans worshipped God, but each side decried, disparaged the religion of the other. There are accounts, in the century long history of conflict between these peoples, of a Jewish high priest burning down the Samaritan Temple, and of a Samaritan scattering the bones of a corpse in the Jewish Temple during Passover. When the Jewish people were under attack by a foreign invader, when the Jews were fighting to protect their homeland, the Samaritans supported the other side. And so the Jews referred to Samaritans, not as people, not even as a nation, they were an evil menace, a terrible threat, out there, and also close to home. Jews and Samaritans lived in proximity, but Samaritans were foreigners, or had moved to the country and sometimes intermarried, the Samaritans were children of immigrants. Terrible things were said and done, by both sides, in the name of religion, ethnicity, difference. Do we know about anything like that? Do we know about distrust because of differences of religion? Country of origin? Color of skin? Do we know about people being attacked, being killed, being left dead, because of it? People who are black and people who are white?

Four weeks ago, in the early hours of a summer Sunday morning, the head of the trauma unit at Orlando Regional Medical Center got a phone call. This man goes by Joey, but his full name is Dr. Joseph Abdellatif Ibrahim. He spent the next hours repairing gunshot wounds in the bodies of people who had been in a gay nightclub. Dr. Joseph Abdellatif Ibrahim, the son of a Muslim immigrant from the Middle East, helped people who were attacked and left half-dead by another son of Muslim immigrants.

Dr. Ibrahim has sons, too. He and his wife, who is from Tennessee, which is where Dr. Ibrahim was raised, he speaks with a drawl—as if what kind of accent he has makes a difference...he and his wife considered not following his cultural tradition of passing on his middle and last names to his oldest son. They thought the names might make their son a target, an object of scrutiny, might make his life difficult. They decided to name him that anyway. Dr. Ibrahim said: “We decided hopefully actions speak louder than words and names.”

And who is my neighbor? Jesus answers the question with a trick of his own, turning the question on object and agent, telling a story that begins with the one who needs help and ends with the one who gives help. Jesus answers, ending with a question: “Who was a neighbor to the one needed one?” It’s a question, but it’s not a trick question. We know the answer, all of us, all of us lawyers, all of us anxiously, fearfully, violently, seeking to justify ourselves. God our physician has written us a prescription, God has written this prescription in the law, in our hearts, in our mouths, we know it: love God and neighbor. Do it and live.