

“Right Answer! Right Understanding?”

The account of the Good Samaritan is one of those iconic narratives that is as well known outside the Church as it is inside. While some will misuse the story, or misapply its intent and purpose, there are few who would not agree with the summation that this story is *at least* about taking care of others.

I ask you to take note that I have refrained from using the word “parable” for this account. Nowhere does Luke identify this as a parable (even though it shares a lot of features with parables) — so I am free to wonder (and I do) if Jesus is not recounting an actual series of events that may have been known to His hearers. While it does not drastically alter the story or its meaning, I have some reasons to suggest this. 1) Most of Jesus’ parables are about village life (and hence village relationships); this is not. 2) The details in this narrative are more pronounced than most of Jesus’ parables. 3) But my primary reason is that Luke does not call it a parable and he does so identify every other such account in his Gospel.

Nonetheless, like all of Jesus’ parables (especially those in Luke) our understanding of them is deeply enhanced when we understand the cultural milieu in which they are told. We can get the sense of the primary message (taking care of others); but we will miss many details without some cultural insights into what is going on.

For instance, when we hear that the man ***“fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead,”*** we may simply conclude that here was a guy in sorry shape after a mugging. What we miss is that Jesus has set up the story so that we can get a rich understanding of why people act as they do in the story: The man was stripped, therefore there were no visible signs of his class, status, ethnicity, or from where he originated. This meant that when the Samaritan approached him and then carted him off to the nearest village, he could not know what kind of trouble he could have been getting himself into. (Did the man come from that village? How would it look

when a Samaritan stranger drags in a half-dead cousin of the entire village? Would they not suspect that the Samaritan had inflicted the damage?) The man was beat to a state of being “half dead,” which made him a taboo object for both the priest and the Levite, for whom touching a dead body would have left them ceremonially unclean and thus unable to fulfil their religious duties. All three travelers come upon this beaten man but have no clues as to who he is; for all they know he may be a brigand feigning injury in order to lure travelers off the road to be attacked by his gang.

There are many other facets to this account that would be worthy of exploration . . . but this is what usually happens with this story — we get caught up in the story (sometimes just as story) and ignore the context into which it was spoken . . . in this instance the context is essential. A ***“lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’”***

I have a drawer full of lawyer jokes, but this is not the time for them — in part because when we hear the word “lawyer” we are thinking of someone very different from what Luke means by “lawyer.” Luke is writing about a person whose primary function was to offer interpretations about the Torah and its applications to daily life. Such interpretations have been gathered together into what is called the Talmud . . . which is just that, a collection of interpretations and narratives concerning the application of the Law. So this is not a Tim Mizny ready to “make them pay” or Alan Dershowitz coming to debate rabbinic nit-picking with Jesus; his role is more substantial than Miss Manners or Hints from Heloise, but he is not a trial lawyer.

Luke does not tell us anything about this man’s motives or agenda so, lacking that, we employ Luther’s advice to “put the best construction on everything” and assume that he is an honest inquirer: he wants to know what he must ***“do to inherit eternal life”***. Jesus could have responded directly: ***“There is nothing to do to inherit anything other than to be a legitimate heir of the one leaving the legacy.”***

But Jesus hardly ever responds to anyone directly . . . it's one of the features of His teaching style. Instead, Jesus (as he often does) asks him a couple of questions. These are not trick questions thrown back at someone who had tried to pull a fast one on Jesus. They are questions that went to the heart of this man's occupation and, more than likely, his identity. ***“What is written in the law? What do you read there?”*** Those are two distinct questions . . . the first asks for a quote (*“What does it say?”*), the second asks for an interpretation (*“What does it mean?”*)

The lawyer responds to the first: ***“You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.”*** As we heard from the Book of Deuteronomy this morning, that command ***“is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away . . . [it] is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.”*** This interpreter of the Law would have known well that passage . . . indeed he more than likely prided himself that he had observed it.

Jesus reinforces this idea when he tells him, ***“You have given the right answer . . .”*** Is there any stroke more appreciated than having a teacher tell you, *“Good job! Right answer!”*? I can just see the pride swell in this man's breast as he looks around at the crowd, and especially at his fellow-lawyers, basking in his successful rightness. But then Jesus kind of pulls the rug out from under him — not violently or with any kind of “Aha!” comeback, but jarring nonetheless: ***“. . . do this, and you will live.”***

Suddenly pride turns to disquiet. *“I gave the right answer . . . that should be enough.”* But it's not enough; covenantal living is never just a matter of passing some written exam with a series of correct choices made on multiple-guess questions. Let me put it this way: Satan knows all the right answers . . .

So another question comes to fore: ***“And who is my neighbor?”*** Now let's see if we can deduce the logic that leads to this question. First off, I would have expected such a person to have heard Jesus and left

immediately, convinced that he had done “this” and therefore was guaranteed life. But, to his credit, he realizes in Jesus’ response that he had missed something. At this point Luke *does* tell us of motive; he is “**wanting to justify himself . . .**” So getting the right answer didn’t provide a big-enough stroke of approval; he knew he was lacking something. It couldn’t be that he had missed on what God required. He was a lawyer, for Pete’s sake! He knew the Torah inside and out! Of course he knew what it meant to love God with all heart, soul, strength, and mind — there could be no question about that! So it must have something to do with neighbor. Hmmmm. How is Jesus defining neighbor? So he asks — and let’s not impugn this man with the oft-expressed idea that he was some dilettante dabbling with cocktail-party questions; as I said, I think he is an honest seeker — “**And who is my neighbor?**”

Now that’s a good question. The only stroke that comes close to getting the right answer in front of the whole class is asking the right question. I listen to a lot of call-in shows on the radio (usually NPR), and often the guest to whom the questions are addressed will respond to the caller: “*That’s a great question!*” That’s a shrewd way to get somebody on your side, whether the question asked is really valuable or not. Sometimes you get the impression that the caller wants to ask “the smart question;” sometimes you sense there is a real concern lying behind the question; often you hear a note of challenge in the caller’s question. Label the question as “great” and you get an ally, if not a convert (and for the truly argumentative caller, his question will be labeled “really great”).

But this *is* a really great question: so I put it to you “*Who is my neighbor?*” Let’s see what answers we get . . .

Once again, Jesus could have given him a straight answer; instead, he tells a story. At the end of which he asks yet one more question: “**Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?**” Do we start to get a sense of Jesus’ definition of “neighbor”? Jesus is not into generic answers to generic questions about

hypothetical situations. In real time, under real circumstances, with real people, in real life, my neighbor is not, and cannot be, some nebulous conflation of “everybody.” In this Jesus is an actualist: It is not the best for the most, it is not for the “common good” — my neighbor is that person whom God has placed in my path at this moment, and for whom I now must decide to render whatever aid I can.

After a lapse, I got back to reading a book by N.T. Wright, the noted New Testament scholar and Bishop of Durham, England. The book’s title is After You Believe; I hope that gives away its premise — it is not about coming to faith, it is about the dilemmas many Christians face trying to live out that faith. Among other redeeming features of this book is the section where he discusses three movements of Western thought, which he claims have had major impact on how we think: the romantic movement, the existentialist movement, and the emotive movement.

Wright writes(try saying that five times fast): *“Whichever of the three you embrace—and in popular culture romanticism, existentialism, and emotivism tend to swirl together in a confused world of impressions and rhetoric—they arrive at the same general position, which many today assume, without more ado, is roughly what Jesus himself taught, and what Christian living ought to be all about. Be yourself; don't let anyone else dictate to you; don't let other people's systems or phobias cramp your style; be honest about what you're really feeling and desiring. Get in touch with the bits of yourself you've been screening out; make friends with them and be true to them. Anything else will result in a diminishing of your true, unique, wonderful self.*

This whole way of thinking has become entrenched in many parts of our world, not least in many parts of many churches. Some people mistake it for the gospel itself, supposing that the romantic and existentialist rejection of rules is the same thing as Paul's doctrine of "justification by faith apart from works of the law," or the same thing as what Jesus was advocating when he confronted the law-bound Pharisees.”

In 2010, ESPN ran a whole series: LeBron James: Three Years Later, but, in the midst of all the talk about “The Decision,” I never heard anyone

question his mother's advice: To do whatever made him happy. That's a given in our times. It is practically the moral imperative. Shakespeare's line in the mouth of Polonius (from Hamlet) runs:

*“This above all—to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.”*

What most people today seem to ignore is that Shakespeare told us Polonius was *“a foolish prating knave.”*

The question *“Who is my neighbor?”* takes on a different slant when the primary goal in life is self-happiness. Which is why the context of the telling of the Good Samaritan story is so important. We need to see that this story is told in answer to the question *“Who is my neighbor?”* We also need to see that how we answer is not just to score well on some morals exam. The lawyer in this account had the right answers. What Jesus kept probing in him was a search for the right understanding. *“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”* Jesus asked.

The lawyer rightly again, answered, *“The one who showed him mercy.”* At that point Jesus goes right to the central issue of understanding. *“Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’”* It may help to get the fuller sense of the Greek, which actually should be translated, *“Go, keep doing this.”* This is not Boy Scout good-deed-a-day morality (there's nothing wrong with that motto, it just is not a full enough reflection of what Jesus is calling for).

Jesus asks of this lawyer, as He asks of us, to build our lives around this understanding: Not “to thine own self be true,” but be true to this principle: Love, which is oftentimes messy and complicated, requires of us an uncalculating concern for those who are around us, and for some who may not be so physically near, all for whom we come to ascertain God is calling us to provide some measure of caring: Food for hungry people, clothing, too; compassion for the one who is in mourning; actual live cash for someone in a bind; a ride home, or to a doctor's appointment; a visit

to someone who lives alone.

Barbara Johnson wrote a little parable that is a perfect commentary on this issue of living out our faith in light today's Gospel:

A man fell into a pit and couldn't get himself out.

A subjective person came along and said, 'I feel for you down there.'

An objective person came along and said, 'It's logical that someone would fall down there.'

A Pharisee said, 'Only bad people fall into a pit.'

A mathematician calculated how he came to fall into the pit.

A news reporter wanted an exclusive story on this pit.

A fundamentalist said, 'You deserve your pit.'

An IRS agent asked if he was paying taxes on the pit.

A self-pitying person said, 'You haven't seen anything until you've seen my pit.'

A charismatic said, 'Just confess that you're not in a pit.'

An optimist said, 'Things could be worse.'

A pessimist said, 'Things will get worse.'

Jesus, seeing the man, took him by the hand and lifted him out of the pit!"

And He told us, **"Go, keep doing this."**

Amen.