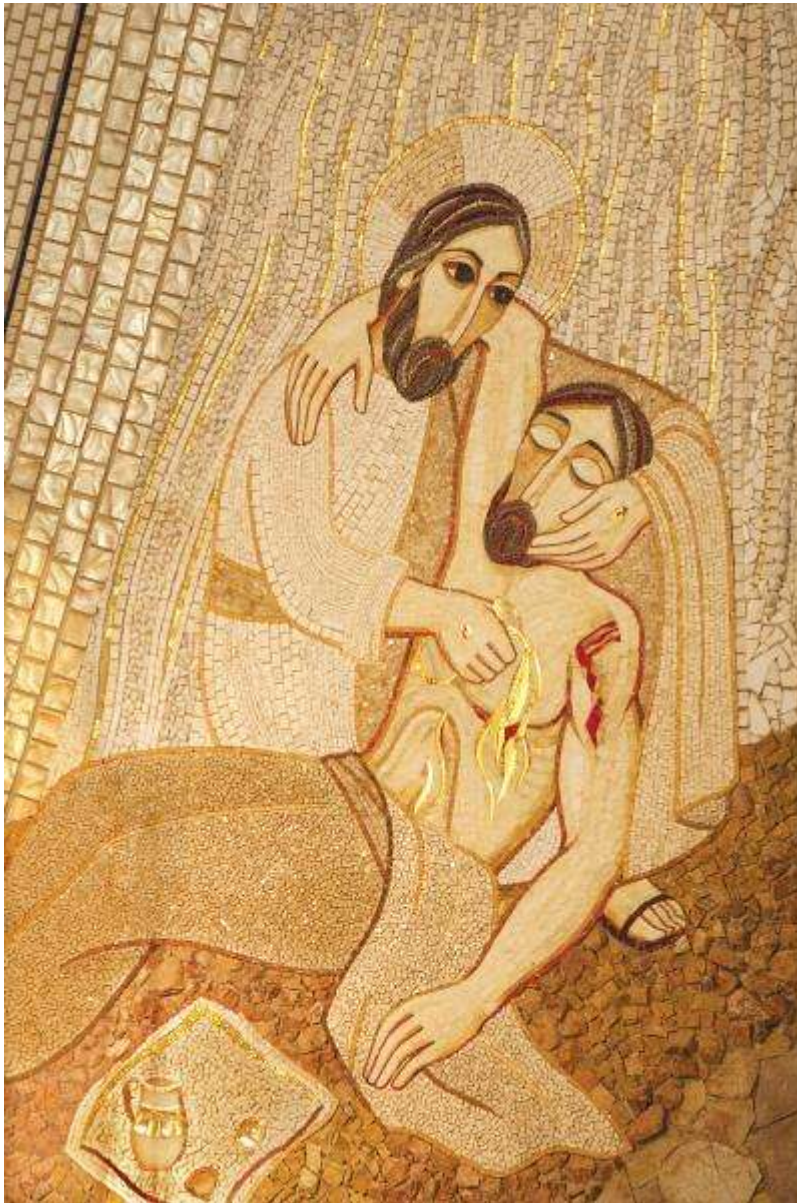


Go and Do Likewise

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Lessons from the parable of the Good Samaritan

Throughout the English-speaking world the term “good Samaritan” is synonymous with charitable do-gooders. Hospitals with the name “Samaritan” appear throughout the United States, from Medstar Good Samaritan Hospital in Baltimore to Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles. Australia has the Good Samaritan Donkey Sanctuary, which does exactly what its name suggests.

The parable of the good Samaritan is so well known for its message of aiding the stranger that it has become a staple of political discourse. Former U.S. president George W. Bush invoked the parable in his first inaugural address: “I can pledge our nation to a goal: when we see that wounded traveler on the road to Jericho, we will not pass to the other side.” For President Bush, the parable is about taking care of nations in distress.

In the 1970s, I heard a citizen of Sierra Leone interpret the parable as proclaiming that one should take aid from whoever would offer it, even the enemy, and thus Jesus gave warrant for his country’s acceptance of aid from the Soviet Union. Although I do not think that this reading is quite the original import of the parable, it at least highlights two important points. It recognizes the role of the Samaritan as enemy and suggests the possibility of interpreter identification with the wounded man rather than the Samaritan who

gives aid. The standard reading is the one in which “we” are the Samaritans; “we Samaritans” help “them,” the sick, the poor, foreign nationals and so on.

The parable of the good Samaritan has come to mean whatever we want it to mean. In one respect, this inevitable appropriation is to be appreciated. Texts should always take on new meaning as they are encountered by new readers from new cultural contexts. However, texts also have their own original context.

The various appropriations and interpretations of the parable heard today are generally good news. What is not to like about helping the stranger and being charitable toward others? But those are not the messages a first-century Jewish audience would have heard. The parable for them would not have been about looking after a fellow human being, and the parable is not, finally, an answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” It is more provocative than that. And if we readers identify with the Samaritan—as the politicians and charitable organizations do—we have missed the deeper implications of the parable as well.

Worse, the standard identification we readers have today with the Samaritan leads to the standard anti-Jewish interpretations that have infected much of New Testament study. In many Christian contexts, the Samaritan comes to represent the Christian who has learned to care for others or to break free of prejudice, whereas the priest and the Levite represent Judaism, understood to be xenophobic, promoting ritual purity over compassion, proclaiming self-interest over love of neighbor and otherwise being something that needs to be rejected.

To get an initial hint of the distance between the mind-set of parable’s original audience and our own 21st-century perspectives, we might begin by reflecting briefly on the term “good Samaritan.” Today, we use the term as if it were not peculiar. Yet as far as I am aware, there are no “Good Catholic” or “Good Baptist” hospitals. To label the Samaritan, any Samaritan, a “good Samaritan” should be, in today’s climate, seen as offensive. It is tantamount to saying, “He’s a good Muslim” (as opposed to all those others who, in this configuration, would be terrorists) or “She’s a good immigrant” (as opposed to all those others who, in this same configuration, are here to take our jobs or scam our welfare system). But what happens when we strip away 2,000 years of usually benevolent and well-intended domestication and hear the parable as a first-century short story spoken by a Jew to other Jews?

Who is My Neighbor?

Jesus tells the parable of the good Samaritan in response to a lawyer’s question: “And who is my neighbor?” (Lk 10:29). The lawyer’s question has legal merit. One needs to know who are neighbors, and so under the Law, and who are not. But in the context of love, his question is not relevant. According to Leviticus, love has to extend beyond the people in one’s group. Leviticus 19 insists on loving the stranger as well. For our parable, the lawyer’s question is again misguided. To ask “Who is my neighbor?” is a polite way of asking, “Who is not my neighbor?” or “Who does not deserve my love?” or “Whose lack of food or shelter can I ignore?” or “Whom I can hate?” The answer Jesus gives is, “No one.” Everyone deserves that love—local or alien, Jews or gentile—everyone.

According to Jewish law, the lawyer is responsible for loving those like him and those who are not like him but who live in proximity to him although they are not part of his people, the “children of Israel” as he defined the term. Leviticus does not explicitly require him to love his “enemy” who lives across the border, outside the boundaries of the community. In Jewish thought, one could not mistreat the enemy, but love was not mandated. Proverbs 25:21 insists, “If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink” (Paul cites Prv 25:21–22 in Rom 12:20). Only Jesus insists on loving

the enemy: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” He may be the only person in antiquity to have given this instruction.

The traveller in the parable is stripped, beaten and left half dead in a ditch. He is robbed not only of his possessions, but also of his dignity, his health and almost his life. Luke describes him as having “wounds” (Gk. *traumata*, hence “trauma”). The lawyer had asked about eternal life—he should rather be worried about those left half dead. And yet half dead is still alive; the man is, despite being naked (as would be a corpse before shrouding) and prostrate, alive. Listeners, identifying with him, can only hope that rescue will come. And because they identify with him, their question—and so our question—is: “Who will help me?”

Just as the fellow in the ditch is revictimized by being labelled a despised merchant or a bad Jew, so too the priest and the Levite receive their share of negative interpretations that go well beyond the justified critique of their failure to act. Stereotypes get in the way. From both classroom and pulpit comes the claim that the priest and the Levite pass by the man in the ditch, because they are afraid of contracting corpse contamination and so violating purity laws. But there is nothing impure about touching a person who is “half dead.” Nor is there any sin involved in burying a corpse; to the contrary, the Torah expects corpses to be interred. The Law, rather, required that both men attend to the fellow in the ditch, whether alive or dead, for one is to “love the neighbour” and “love the stranger” both.

Arguments that read the parable in terms of “uncleanness” or “purity” are made by modern Christians, not by Jesus or Luke. Neither gives the priest or Levite an excuse. Nor would any excuse be acceptable. Their responsibility was to save a life; they failed. Saving a life is so important that Jewish Law mandates that it override every other concern, including keeping the Sabbath (e.g., 1 Mc 2:31–41; 2 Mc 6:11; Mishnah, *Shabbat* 18:3). Their responsibility, should the man have died, was to bury the corpse. They failed here as well.

The best explanation I have heard for the refusal of the priest and the Levite to come to the aid of the man in the ditch comes from Martin Luther King Jr., who preached: “I’m going to tell you what my imagination tells me. It’s possible these men were afraid.... And so the first question that the priest [and] the Levite asked was, ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’... But then the good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’” King went on, “If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?” King then went to Memphis, and it was there he was assassinated. There are bandits on the road.

Whatever the motives of the priest and the Levite, King is correct. They, like the lawyer, thought only about themselves, not about the man in the ditch.

The Rule of Three

For Jesus’ audience, and for any synagogue congregation today, the third of the group is obvious. Mention a priest and a Levite, and anyone who knows anything about Judaism will know that the third person is an Israelite. The audience, surprised at this lack of compassion, would have presumed both that the third person would be an Israelite and that he would help. However, Jesus is telling a parable, and parables never go the way one expects. Instead of the anticipated Israelite, the person who stops to help is a Samaritan. In modern terms, this would be like going from Larry and Moe to Osama bin Laden.

The Samaritan’s compassion then becomes, for many of today’s interpreters, the hook by which the sermon functions. In a number of settings, the parable serves as a warning against prejudice; for example, the two who walk by are a pastor and a choir director, while the Samaritan is a gay man, an “illegal

immigrant,” a person on parole or any other victim of bigotry. The point in this reading is that “they” are really nice, that “we” sometimes fail in our obligations to help and that “we” too should “have compassion” on those who are mistreated.

But to understand the parable as did its original audience, we need to think of Samaritans less as oppressed but benevolent figures and more as the enemy, as those who do the oppressing. From the perspective of the man in the ditch, Jewish listeners might balk at the idea of receiving Samaritan aid. They might have thought, “I’d rather die than acknowledge that one from that group saved me”; “I do not want to acknowledge that a rapist has a human face”; or “I do not want to recognize that a murderer will be the one to rescue me.”

The lawyer asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbour?” Jesus reframes the question. As Martin Luther King Jr. so eloquently revealed in his sermon, asking the right question is of utmost importance. The issue for Jesus is not the “who,” but the “what,” not the identity but the action. The lawyer is unable even to voice the hated name “Samaritan.” He can only say, “The one doing mercy for him.”

The parable spoke about compassion, but the lawyer read the action as one of mercy. His rephrasing the issue is apt: compassion can be felt in the gut; mercy needs to be enacted with the body. The term may come from Luke, who uses it extensively, but only in the infancy materials, where mercy is an attribute of the divine: For the lawyer, and for Luke’s readers, the Samaritan does what God does. The divine is manifested only through our actions. Therefore, Jesus responds to the lawyer’s observation not with a question and not with a parable, but with an imperative: “Go,” he says, “and you do likewise.”

We do not know what the lawyer did following this parable. Nor do we know if the parable was actually spoken to a lawyer, or if Luke has provided both the opening and closing frame. All we can know is what we, upon hearing this parable in its narrative frame, will do.

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