

Not Too Far Away
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What do you do when you have a question and don't know the answer? Some people are able to just put the question out of their minds. Some people consult their local expert. I know one person who routinely types random questions into the search engine on his computer - things like "How do you make raised garden beds with concrete blocks?" – and the results come in the form of text, images **and** video. It's great.

Some questions – like "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" – can be typed into the search bar, making its way through the intricacies of the internet, and the results send you straight to the Bible, straight to the passage that was read today. And there, the reply comes not with an image or a video or an essay, but with a parable. In other words, when Jesus is your search engine, you get stories, and often, more questions. There is a reason for this. I believe that Jesus was trying to get us to internalize a response, to personalize a response, to bring it home and bring it close....closer even than our keyboards.

At times, we read in the Bible about the transcendence, the unknowable quality of God. Isaiah announced, "Truly you are a God who hides yourself." (45:15). Paul wrote to the Roman church, "How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (11:33). This kind of statement expresses our feelings when we are "stumped" or confused or trampled by life, when tragedy hits home, for instance. They can also express how we feel when we receive unexpected gifts of love and grace. In the vernacular, we might say, "God, what is up, here?!" Or we even turn from speaking to God because the gap between humanity and divinity feels so enormous.

But, at other times, passages in Scripture remind us that God is still speaking, that God's word is still accessible, and that God may even be too close for comfort. In our first reading, Moses is giving a farewell speech, and tells the Hebrews that God's commandments are "not too hard" to perform, and that they are not too far away from everyday real life. He says, "The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe." The presence of God remains mysterious, but the possibility of devotion to God, and walking in "God's holy ways" (as our covenant reads) is close, doable, and knowable. In fact, somewhere, deep down, we **already** know what the Lord requires of us.

When Jesus has the Q & A session with the lawyer, he assumes that the lawyer already knows the answers. But, this is still a teaching moment for that "testing" lawyer. The expert in the law types into the Jesus search engine: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Now, this is a specifically first century sort of question. Moses did not talk about inheriting eternal life: he talked about a covenant wherein people may acquire the blessings of this life. But, by the time of Jesus, some Jews were speculating that something deeper was at stake: the life of the soul. Jesus, with good Socratic technique, throws back 2 more questions: What is written in the law? What do you read there? In other words, "You **already** know what God requires; it is very near; it is in your mouth and in your heart." The lawyer's answer proves that this is so. The key to the life of the soul

is as old as the law of Moses and as near as the writings of the prophets: Love God with your whole being; love your neighbor as yourself.

But the lawyer still wants to follow up, maybe to display an inquiring and discerning mind. “And who is my neighbor?” And so, the parable, about a robbery, and the mysteries of compassion. A parable - not a ‘to do list,’ not a chart of who’s in and who’s out, not special insider knowledge. Just a series of mental pictures: a beaten man, left for dead on a dangerous road – two men with religious obligations walking quickly past – a hated foreigner coming near and being moved with pity. The victim is cared for and restored to health. Who is the neighbor? The one who shows mercy.

We pose questions all the time: in worship, in classes, in committee meetings. (My favorite question, of course is the one asked in our weekly round, “What Does the Lord Require of You?” Asked repeatedly by the men, and answered just as repeatedly by the women. Someday we should switch it around, so the men get to sing the answer for once.) But seriously, in our many church activities, we question: Who is our neighbor? What is the best use of our time, talent, substance and influence? How do we share the mercy taught by Christ with the world? Through listening and sharing, we often discover that the answer is often very near, it is in our mouths and our hearts. Through listening and sharing, we sometimes find that we have internalized the life and teachings and parables of Jesus, and we already know the path to a life of blessing.

In the Luke reading, the lawyer’s answer to “What is written in the law?” is known as the great commandment. It **is** a great commandment, but, like many other well-worn texts, it has a tendency to become domesticated with time. And so, a parable, to give it new life and meaning. We, on the other hand, have heard the **parable** so many times that we may have stopped listening as well...or we think only of the kind person who stops to help us when we have a flat tire. I ask myself, what new parable needs to be told so that we, like the lawyer, sit up and take notice? What can we do to accept and embody the challenge of Rabbi Jesus? I wonder, would today’s parable begin: “A lawyer asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ Jesus replied. ‘A teenager was going out one evening to buy some skittles....’”

Today’s baptism makes me think about how a child discovers that core of compassion and mercy. At first, there are no verbal questions asked (they don’t have the lawyer’s subtlety) - there is just clear and unspoken need and response in an infant. But questions do come, children do learn, and we answer with living parables. By accepting a new child into the church family, we are pledging to be living parables of love and mercy. We want to make the great commandment to love as clear as possible. We want to make it as obvious as we can that old barriers of nationality and race and religion do not limit compassion. When a child types “And who is my neighbor” into the search engine of our living, breathing congregation, we want images and stories and words that will give that child a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose.

Because, now as in Jesus’ time, so much is at stake. The boundaries lines drawn between those we help and those we kill have wounded and defaced our world. In fear or in self-defense or greed, we forget the greatest commandment, and we forget to ask the questions that will lead us home. And so let us hear the parables – those spoken by Jesus and those lived by people of faith. In our mouths, in our hearts, in our hands, in each generous act, let us seek out the unknown neighbor. Let us be parables, answers to questions, so that the love of God is never too far away from those in need. Amen.

