

The Word is Very Near
July 10, 2016
Mary R. Brownlow

And who is my neighbor?

A Yazidi merchant was traveling from Aleppo to Damascus, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a foreign aid worker was going down that road and when she saw him, she passed by the other side (meaning to call into her office and let them know the problem). So likewise a local official, when he came to the place, passed by on the other side (fearing that this was a ruse for a roadside explosive). But a militiaman, while traveling came near him, and when he saw him, was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds with antibiotic ointment and gave him some painkillers. The he put him in his jeep and brought him to the nearest clinic and stayed to make sure he was all right. The next day he took out all his money and gave it to the nurse at the clinic and said, "Take care of him until I come back. I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was neighbor to the man who fell among thieves?

Or, maybe this week, the story should go: a man was selling CD's outside a convenience store and fell into the hands of the local police... Or, a man was driving a car with a broken taillight, with a legally purchased hand gun in the vehicle... And people kept going, afraid to get involved. Or, a person stopped, and filmed with their cell phone... or neighbors gathered to protest... The recent illegal killings of Alton Sterling, Philando Castile and 5 police officers in Dallas challenges all our notions of justice, and all our notions of who our are neighbors, and what are our responsibilities.

The Good Samaritan parable from the Gospel of Luke is one of the most widely known and popular of all the stories Jesus told. Even people who don't attend worship services or read the Bible recognize it. The language of the "Good Samaritan" is a part of our culture's working vocabulary. It is used to name hospitals. Both the United States and Canada have Good Samaritan Laws. They protect anyone who chooses to help another person in trouble from liability in case something goes wrong. These laws are meant to encourage bystanders to offer assistance to strangers in need, to be Good Samaritans. We have all agreed that it is important to encourage this kind of compassionate action. But that popular concept of "Samaritan" obscures most of the complexity and richness of the original parable. Let's not sink into our comfortable, complacent ideas of neighborliness and pity. This is dangerous stuff we're hearing.

There are some characters in this story that need to be rehabilitated. First, the lawyer. He is often portrayed as someone who is against Jesus, engaged in an antagonistic debate, trying to follow the law closely so that he can escape the burden of true compassion. But not all devout Jews were against Jesus. The text says that he was testing Jesus with a question: this was the common kind of sincere inquiry that scholars everywhere used to discern the philosophy and approach of a teacher. This question- "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" - would establish whether Jesus actually accepted the concept of "eternal life." Some Jews would say that there was no such thing. Others would say that one should have many children, so that you would live on in your descendants. Others would talk about the coming apocalypse and God's moment of judgment. Using, as he often did, the Socratic method, Jesus responds with his own question, showing his own inclination to delve into the law. The lawyer quotes from both Deuteronomy and Leviticus, pairing love of God with love of neighbor. Jesus affirms this: "do this and you will live."

The next line, saying that the lawyer asks another question "to justify himself" is often interpreted as a self-interested, self-righteous attempt at evasion. "Who is my neighbor?" But "justify" can also describe the attempt to continue a search for ethical living: a sincere question about the implications of the broadly stated law. Who is a neighbor? Technically it is the one who is "nigh," the one who is next to us. The lawyer

wonders how to define “nigh” in the confusing multi-cultural, multi-religious place that Israel had become within the Roman Empire. He was continuing the faith conversation in the tradition of Jewish scholars of his time and ours.

So we have the parable. This time, when I read it, I was struck by the fact that all these people were on the road alone. This was a dangerous road, the one between Jerusalem and Jericho. A narrow, winding path, 17 miles long, dropping 3,600 feet in altitude, famous for robbers who lived in the caves nearby and could easily pick off travelers. Why even set out without a large caravan, and a few strong bodyguards with weapons? It is striking because each individual is presented as having an internal choice, an internal debate, rather than acting in concert with others. So, I need to rehabilitate the Priest and the Levite as well. They were not just heartless. They had to consider their own safety: very reasonable. They had to consider their obligations at the Temple in Jerusalem, and all the other people who depended on them. If they had touched the man and he was dead, they would have been made ritually impure, unfit for Temple service, and could be seen as shirking their duties. Much as a parent might consider what impact their good deeds would have on the welfare of their children, they were looking at the big picture, and passing by on the other side. They were not drawing “nigh” to the wounded man, and he was *not* their neighbor. But I can’t really blame them, any more than I would blame an aid worker in Syria or a person on a dark street in Baton Rouge.

And who was this Samaritan? A foreigner of sorts, but a next-door-neighbor sort of foreigner. He read the same books of law as the Jews, honored Moses and the ancestral patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. So he was bound by the same sorts of rules. He would not have worshipped at Jerusalem, and he may have harbored resentment against the Jews who had burned the Samaritan places of worship decades before. So there were tribal and political divisions, but not ethical ones. He was actually in greater danger than any of the others, traveling outside his own territory, probably encountering hatred and prejudice all along the way. But all these markers of identity, all this history was dissolved in one transformative moment: “when he saw him, he was moved with pity.” When we hear this phrase elsewhere in the Gospels, it is usually talking about Jesus: “He saw the crowds and was moved with pity”, “he saw the leper and was moved with pity”, “he saw the grieving mother and was moved with pity”. This is the kind of gut reaction that does not allow a person to walk by. When Jesus felt that way, he fed people and healed people: a sign that the Kingdom was drawing nigh. When the Samaritan feels this way, he is moved to action.

We get a lot of details here, making it clear that it is about touching a person’s wounds and carrying them, really close contact with the “enemy” was going on. Alarms about contamination would have been flashing in the lawyer’s head. And there was advocacy for the enemy as well: speaking to the innkeeper, using his financial resources, promising his time and attention. This is as much as you expect of your best friend. The Samaritan had truly come “nigh”, and so we call him “Good.” What we forget is that this was an oxymoron in its day. There could be no such thing as a Good Samaritan, any more than we can imagine a Good Islamic Militant. The gulf was too wide. The mental leap was too far.

And the first person making that leap is actually the wounded man. Desperate as he is, he had to endure the touch of the enemy. In the story, he is completely passive: a victim and then an object of mercy. We have absolutely no mention of his feelings or thoughts, except that he had been left half-dead by the robbers. But I wonder about his transformative moment too – the moment of pity, of touch, of fear and of healing. He had to redefine neighbor as well. Jesus hints at this with his follow-up question to the lawyer: “Which of these three was neighbor to the man who was robbed?” Not, “who was the Good Samaritan’s neighbor?” This relationship is to be seen from the eyes of the victim, not the helper.

Our story closes with the lawyer seeing the point of the parable. He doesn’t say “the Good Samaritan” – those two words might have been a little tough for him to speak together. But he says “the one who showed mercy” and that is clear enough. Jesus urges him to go and do likewise: in other words, to draw nigh to wounded people without concern for strict lines of purity or culture or religion or ethnicity. The story closes there, but I wonder if this is just the start of this conversation with the lawyer. We are like him,

observers and students of Jesus. Our art is storytelling, too. Our deepest truths begin with phrases like, "There was a man who had two sons..." or "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way... or "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho...." We are called to tell the story and imagine the story until it changes us too. These ancient stories of scripture are so powerful because we are in them. They meet us where we are and bring us to meeting places on the road. They are conversation starters, not conversation enders. So I like to think that the lawyer and Jesus continued their back and forth, question and answer dialogue. And I like to think that we can do the same.

I return to the lawyer's original question, the one that sparked the parable: "What must I do to inherit eternal life." People usually equate this with "earning a place in heaven." But there is so much more to it: a deeper and broader and sweeter and fuller life in this moment, in our time, is available to us. It is called "living abundantly." And inheriting is something families do, not something wage-earners do. We are being invited into new relationships based on that moment of pity, of empathy in the gut. We are invited to listen to the lawyer when he puts love of God side by side with love of neighbor. And then to cross the road and do it.

When we tell the story and try to imagine it, we might try on the roles of the different people involved. In the early church, another approach, an allegorical approach, was taken. The man who fell among thieves was any person afflicted by the ills of this world. The Priest was the Law, the Levite was the Prophets, and the Samaritan was Christ. Christ risks all for humanity, brings us to the Inn – the Church – where we might find healing. And promises to come again. So this starts another conversation, in which Christ, drawing nigh to us, reveals the friend, the neighbor, hidden behind our fears and prejudice.

A 6th century monk, Dorotheos of Gaza used this image to talk about drawing nigh to our neighbor: *"Suppose we were to take a compass and insert the point and draw the outline of a circle. The center point is the same distance from any point on the circumference... Let us suppose that this circle is the world and that God is the center; the straight lines drawn from the circumference to the center are the lives of people. To the degree that the saints enter into the things of the spirit, they desire to come near to God; and in proportion to their progress in the things of the spirit, they do in fact come close to God and to their neighbor. The closer they are to God, the closer they become to one another; and the closer they are to one another, the closer they become to God."*

Today I ask myself, what road must our nation cross to be the neighbor of black men and women who are threatened by the very systems we rely on for safety and justice? How many men must fall on the side of the road before we act?

This church, this room and the rooms all around us, this is a great place to converse about Scripture, about our obligations, about rules and pity, about the surprising words God places side by side. Here we can honestly voice our fears about the risks of mercy. We can wonder how our descriptions of enemies fit. We can admit that today, we are the wounded man. We can tell the story of how yesterday, we passed by on the other side. We can listen to stories of mercy and courage. We can live into that life, promised as an inheritance. We can do this, and live.