

The View From the Ditch
 Luke 10:25-37
 Tracy Hartman
 Farmville Baptist Church
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We've heard this story countless times, haven't we? How many of us have donned bathrobes and towels on our heads in VBS and acted this story out? We know the moral by heart. "Do as the Samaritan did, and help your neighbor." Case closed, we can go home early today. (PAUSE)

You really don't think we're going to get off that easily do you? As we have mentioned several times in this series, Jesus' parables have multiple layers and often subversive meanings, and this one is no exception. So settle in for a few minutes and let's dig in.

First, let's start with a question. What do you think of when you hear "good Samaritan"? It's synonymous with someone who is charitable or does good deeds. There are Good Samaritan hospitals, and many churches do shoeboxes for Samaritan's Purse. Nearly everyone today knows and understands the term Good Samaritan. However, scholar Amy Jill Levine notes that helping a stranger and being charitable were not the messages that Jesus' first century Jewish audience would have heard from this story. So what might they have heard?

First, we need to pay attention to the context of the story which begins when a lawyer asks Jesus a question. Luke, and Jesus for that matter, don't seem to care much for lawyers or they would not have listed them among the righteous; but the hearers in the crowd probably viewed them more favorably. On this day, the lawyer is testing Jesus. The word "test" here is the same word as "tempt" so the lawyer is playing the devil's advocate.¹ "Teacher (this was not a term of respect by the way)," the lawyer asks Jesus, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" It is as if the lawyer is looking for a check box, one single thing he can do to take care of this

matter and move on. He assumes that eternal life is a commodity that can be inherited or purchased, not a gift freely given. But as we'll see in a minute, he's asking the whole wrong question. Further more, as a good Jew, one versed in the Torah, he would already know the answer to his own question.

Did you notice that Jesus doesn't give him a direct answer? Jesus often answers a question with a question, especially when he knew someone was trying to trap him. So instead of telling the lawyer the four spiritual laws or leading him in the sinner's prayer, Jesus asks **him** a question (which would have shown Jesus's lack of respect for the lawyer). "What is written in the law? How do you read it or how do you *interpret* it," Jesus asks - giving us our first clue that things are not as clear cut as they might seem. The lawyer quickly answers by quoting Deut. 6 and Lev. 19, "You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, strength and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself."

So far so good. Jesus affirms the lawyer's answer and tells him, "Do this - love God and your neighbor - and you will live." The lawyer asks about eternal life, but Jesus refocuses him on the present - on relationship. He reminds that lawyer that it is not enough to know the commandments, he must live them out. (Pause).

If only the lawyer could have left well enough alone - we really might have gone home early today. But alas, he could not. "And who is my neighbor?" he asks. What does this question imply? Who is **not** my neighbor? Who doesn't deserve love and care, whose lack of food and shelter can I ignore? Who can I hate?ⁱⁱ In legal terms, the lawyer's question might have been relevant, but in kingdom terms it is not. The lawyer should have known this. From Leviticus he would have read the commandment to love the stranger. In Proverbs he would have read, "If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat, if they are thirsty, give them water to drink."

We should know the answer to this question too. In Matthew 5:43 Jesus said, "You have heard it said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those that hate you."

On that day, Jesus doesn't answer the lawyer's second question directly either. Instead he tells a story . . .

A certain man was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. As with the parable of the Father who had two sons, this opening line tells us who the story is about — it's about the man travelling the road. We know nothing about this poor guy — no name, no age, no title or position, no ethnic or economic status. Jesus' hearers likely would have assumed he was a good Jewish man — just like they were. We do know that he becomes the victim of a violent crime — robbers strip him, beat him, and leave him for dead on the side of the road. In addition to being robbed of his possessions, he is robbed of his dignity, his able body, and almost his life.

You may remember that the road descended steeply from Jerusalem to Jericho — and that it was full of narrow passages and large boulders where bandits would wait to terrorize travelers. It was unwise to navigate this road alone. If there were others travelling with the man — they are long gone — perhaps they fled in terror. He lies there alone in desperate need.ⁱⁱⁱ

The next part of the story sets up like a bar joke doesn't it? Three men come upon a wounded traveler: a priest, and Levite, and — — If you were one of the original hearers of this story, how would you fill in the blank? The hearers would expect an Israelite, a Jew like them. They would expect the loyal lay person to be the hero at the expense of the clergy who by-passed without helping. But that's not what they get at all is it? The joke is on the listeners — and on the lawyer — when Jesus names the Samaritan as the hero.

But before we get to the hero ó let's talk about the priest and the Levite. Often when Christians study this parable, the priest and the Levite are equated with Judaism and the negative stereotype or generalization that Jews would value purity over compassion. Then, by default, the Samaritan represents good Christians who care for others. Amy Jill Levine tells us that this interpretation doesn't hold water. First, the characters in this story are going **down** the road, away from Jerusalem. Since they are headed away from the temple, it would not be a problem if they were temporarily ritually unclean. Further, the Babylonian Talmud teaches, "As long as there is no other person to look after a burial, the first Jew who passes is required to bury the body, no exceptions.

Jews observe this law even today. I learned this week that in response to this law, Jews kept vigil at the World Trade Center until every corpse had been recovered. This is one of the most important laws, because the beneficiary of the kindness ó whoever died ó cannot repay the act of kindness.^{iv}

So, it wasn't concern for ritual purity that kept the priest and Levite from helping, they just blew it. Neither Luke nor Jesus offers excuses for them, because none would be acceptable, they just failed. Martin Luther King Jr. wondered if they first two men were afraid. Were the attackers still lurking nearby, hoping for a second victim? It seems they are thinking only of themselves and their own safety.^v

But then came the third man, the Samaritan. This would have sounded as jarring to the original hearers as Larry, Moe and Osama bin Laden would sound to us. If we were only half-listening, it would make us jerk our heads up in shock. And the Samaritan is indeed the rescuer. Instead of asking, "What will happen to me if I stop," he seems to ask, "What will happen to this poor man if I don't?" The Samaritan restores the man to life, he has compassion on him, and he

invests in his long term care. He basically gives the innkeeper his credit card or a blank check and trusts him to do right by the wounded traveler. This is not a one and done act for him.ö

Most of us know that the Jews and Samaritans were enemies. Jews would rather walk all the way around Samaria than have to walk through it. Here are a few reasons why. Samaria was also called Shechem ó that's the well where Dinah ó an Israelite ó was violated by a Samaritan, it was where Abimelech murdered his rivals. In II Chron. 28, we read that the Samaritans captured 200,000 Judean women and children and took much booty from Israel. At that time, Samaritans were actually Israel's oppressors. And Jesus has the nerve to hold a Samaritan up as a hero, to call him good.

That would be distasteful enough. But remember, who is this story about? The wounded traveler. Who do the hearers identify with? Not the priest, not the Levite, certainly not the Samaritan --- as we said at the beginning, they identify with the traveler ó the one in the ditch. And what does that mean then? It means that the hearers must picture themselves **accepting** help from an enemy. It forces them to deal with the fact that an oppressor will now be their rescuer. They may well have said, öI would rather die here than accept help from him.ö

(PAUSE)

After Jesus finishes this shocking story, he asks the lawyer one more question. öWhich of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?ö The lawyer is so stunned, so offended that he cannot even say the word Samaritan. The best he can do is, öThe one who showed him mercy.ö

It wouldn't be the first time a Samaritan showed mercy in Scripture. Back in the story in II Chronicles, the prophet Oded had a word for the Samaritans. öThe wrath of God is on you,ö he said. öReturn the captives.ö And the Samaritans did. They took the captives and all of the

booty they had stolen, they clothed the naked and gave them sandals, they fed and anointed them and put the feeble on their donkeys (this is sounding like the Good Samaritan isn't is), and they brought them to their kindred in Jericho. Ultimately, what did they do? They broke the cycle of violence and warring, they showed us that those who want to kill us can indeed rescue us.^{vi}

This text raised hard questions for Jesus' hearers, and it raises hard questions for us as well. Can we finally agree that it is better to acknowledge the humanity and the potential to do good in our enemies, rather than to default to war and death? Can we care for our enemies who are also our neighbors ó can we allow them to care for us in return? Can we bind up their wounds instead of blow up their cities? Can we make this our life's work and not just a one time act?

(PAUSE)

Our story is almost over, but not quite. Jesus asked the lawyer, "Which of these was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

"The one who showed him mercy," said the lawyer.

And now the time for questions is over. "Go and do likewise," said Jesus.

May it be so for all of us. Amen.

ⁱ Amy Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*. New York: Harper Collins, 2014, p. 78.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 86.

ⁱⁱⁱ This section references *The New Interpreter's Bible* Volume 9, pp 227-228.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 93-94.

^v *Ibid.*, 94.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 102-103