

Many of us know this story pretty well, don't we? On one side of the road is a man lying in a ditch. On the other side of the road is a well-to-do public official, walking by blind to the needs of his fellow human who is suffering. He is soon followed by an upper middle class socialite too concerned with his own business to notice the man in need. On one side of the road is suffering, on the other side is apathy. That is, until an unexpected do-gooder walks by—a Samaritan, a half-breed, an outcast, a heretic. And this unlikeliest of benefactors stops his journey, comes to the man's assistance, binds his wounds, carries him to an inn, and promises to return to see him back to full health.

Yes, many of us know this story so well that we could recount it off the top of our heads without much thought. On one of the road is the victim; on the other side is the self-righteous. That's how it goes. Right? We learned it from our elders and we teach it to our children. And it does make a wonderful children's sermon, doesn't it: Remember to be nice to everyone you meet.

Oh, occasionally we hear a creative retelling of the tale—one which tries to weave in modern characters and issues. There's the version where the Border patrol agent, is so focused on catching his prey walks past a man who is suffering. Then comes an Arizona state trooper, with his newly given charge to round up illegal aliens, and he too walks to the other side, passing by the man in need. Finally, an undocumented immigrant stops and cares for the man, putting himself at great risk out of compassion for his fellow human being.

And then there's the classic version: An awful Auburn fan full of foolish pride walks past a neighbor in need, followed by a terrible Tennessee fan, who also passes by to the other side. And finally, a humble, modest, polite, honorable Alabama fan stops to care for his neighbor.

These shock-intended remakes of the story may be helpful in drawing our imaginations into considering how a biblical story sounds in our contemporary world. But there's an inherent problem lying within them. It's the same problem that arises when we tell the original story with the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan. You see, we take the miracle right out of the story, and turn it into a cute little moral reminder about being nice.

That's right, whether we mean to or not, we usually remove the miraculous from this story every time we tell it. We do so by portraying the first two passers-by in a very negative way: the priest and the Levite, who go over to the other side of the road.

On one side of the road is suffering; on the other side is apathy. On one side is pain; on the other side is self-righteousness. On one side is the neighbor; on the other side is the rigid law. On one side is need; on the other side is pride.

We paint such an awful picture of those on the other side, the priest and Levite. We make them look so bad, that they end up merely serving as prop characters, who's only role in story is to set the scene with the good Samaritan. We demonize the priest and the Levite to such a degree that it becomes impossible for us to identify ourselves in their shoes. When Jesus tells the story, he isn't saying, “don't be like these two rotten eggs, instead be like this model citizen.” No, that's too easy. Far too easy for Jesus, the Master of Parables, the one who tells tales that make our head spin and turn all our assumptions upside-down.

For Jesus, the storyteller, this parable was all about the miraculous, the amazing, the earth-shattering unexpectedness of God's love breaking into the world being reflected in the actions of an enemy. But when we villanize the priest and the Levite, we make *them* seem like the ones who are out of the ordinary. When they are portrayed as unexpectedly cruel and

indifferent, then the mercy of the Samaritan seems like the obvious response to the man in need—quite the opposite of what the Master of the Parables intended when he told this tale.ⁱ

So, in search of the true wonder and power of this parable, let’s go back a bit, and try to find what’s really going on in the story. First of all, we must remember the context in which it is told. Jesus is in a conversation with a lawyer, or rather a scholar of the law. Basically, we could think of him as a typical Presbyterian—someone wise and possibly well educated—someone who’s faith leads him to ask the big questions like “what must I do to have life in its eternal fullness?”ⁱⁱ or “who is my neighbor?” or “If I believe all this, then what difference should it make in my life?”

Well, Jesus seems to sense that there are some deep struggles at play in the lawyer’s questions, and rather than giving the man a quick answer, one more rule to try to live by, Jesus instead invites him to open his imagination and walk into the strange world of a parable. As Christopher Henry says,

When Jesus confronts a heavy question, he does so not with propositional assertions or creedal statements, but through the telling of stories. Let me tell you a story: A sower went out to sow. Someone gave a great dinner and invited many guests. It is as if there are some truths so profound that only a story can describe them, so personal and transformational that only a story will convey the message. A story has the capacity to create community and to reshape the alert and invested hearer.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is precisely such a story that the Master weaves here for the lawyer, and for all of us who carry on in his tradition—asking real questions of life and wondering how to make sense of our faith in the tough world in which we live.

The story starts with a violent act. There’s a man. There’s a gang of bandits. There’s a confrontation. The man is left for dead on the side of the road.

Along comes a priest. A religious leader of the community of faith. Remember, rather than jumping to a decision about his character and labeling him as some pompous, self-serving televangelist, let’s give the priest the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he’s a good person. Maybe he’s a wonderfully gifted pastor. We’ll call him Steve. Steve is returning home from a long day of work in Jerusalem, where he has been hard at work loving God and loving his neighbor. He’s visited beside the bed of a number of sick people. He’s held hands and prayed with a family in their grief. He’s planned a funeral, preached two sermons, conducted a wedding, done premarital counseling for 3 more couples, met with 5 committees, planned Sunday School and GoForthers events for the next 6 months, attended a meeting of the board of deacons, and taken homebound communion to members of the church. Steve has been very busy...busy doing the work that God has called him to do...busy doing the work of the church...busy loving his God and loving his neighbor. He is finally on his way home, exhausted physically, mentally, and spiritually. He can do no more, and although he briefly notices that there’s someone lying on the side of the road, he just simply can’t bring himself to stop. Not now, not tonight. He needs to get home, so he goes over to the other side of the road.

Then along comes a Levite, an active leader in the faith community. We’ll call her Katie. Katie is on her way home from a long afternoon of teaching children about science and health through the work of the organic gardening project in Sterling. Before she could come home she had to conduct a meeting of the Mission and Witness Committee, which she chairs. By now it’s dark outside and hard to see. That sorta looks like a person over there on the side of the road, but it’s hard to tell in this light, maybe I’ll go over to the other side of the road just in case.

Or maybe this Levite is a guy named Don who's coming back from feeding folks at Triune Mercy Center, or maybe it's Amy and Rebeckah who are exhausted after planning, leading, and then cleaning up after a wonderful Vacation Church School. Or maybe it's Gene, who is almost home after an 10 hour drive back from a disaster relief trip to New Orleans, or maybe it's Mary, who's been baking the best desserts you've ever tasted for her PW circle, or maybe it's Jeff who's been hard at work designing a new church website, or maybe it's Debbie who's had her patience tried by a rambunctious children's choir, or maybe it's Rebecca, Renee, or Jared who stayed up until 4:30 am with the youth at Montreat, or maybe it's Jackie who just finished writing devotional resources to help guide others in their faith, or maybe it's Bill who's been helping start churches all over the Upstate, or maybe it's Lucy or Clint who have been reading with and tutoring children this summer, or maybe it's Hannah or Julie who have been welcoming families through the GAIHN program, or maybe it's a mother of 3 trying to get her children home, or maybe it's a social justice worker, or an adoptive parent, or a school teacher, or a loving grandparent, or maybe it's you, or maybe it's me, or maybe it's all of us. The priest and the Levite are the faithful people of God. People who have been hard at work loving God and loving their neighbors.

These sisters and brothers were good people by every way in which we in the church measure goodness. And, walking along on the other side of the road, they were doing God's work. It wasn't out of some evil, prideful, self-serving attitude that they passed by the man in need. They were already serving those in need. They were devoted to important causes, programs, and ministries.

Then along comes this Samaritan...and along comes a miracle. You see the miracle, the wonder beyond all wonders, is that the Samaritan saw the man lying on the other side of the road. Somehow, in the midst of all his own busyness God gave this Samaritan the miracle of true sight, and he was able to see the one whom the rest of us just walked right past. He saw and he was moved with compassion. Sure, if we had seen him, truly seen him, we might probably would have helped...and that's precisely the miracle, the Samaritan (of all people) did see him. The Samaritan opened more than just his eyes, and embraced the man's suffering as his own.

The point of the story is not to shame us. Nor is it merely to move us to be more nice and caring. No, the story isn't about *us* at all, it's about God and God's kingdom. Jesus is saying to the lawyer, and to us, “You see in God's eyes, all are seen. All who suffer are known and loved. In the Kingdom of God anything is possible and everything is upside down. In the Kingdom of God, the outcast, the one condemned by others, will become the caretaker and the host.” This parable is a story about God's miracle done through the Samaritan. He could have kept walking just like us, but God had other plans for him. And so the Samaritan *stopped*, he *looked*, his *heart was moved*, and he *responded* to God's call to care for the neighbor.

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Friends, the same is the case with us this morning as we are gathered here for worship, and where we will soon be welcomed to this table, the Lord's Table, as we celebrate the sacrament of communion.

Here, we are invited to **stop**. To stop all the busyness of life that demands of our attention—even the good busyness.

Here we are invited to **look**, to look with wonder, to look with miraculously given sight at this table. To the world it would seem as a mere piece of wood, with bits of bread and tiny plastic cups of grape juice, but we are invited to look with Samaritan sight and to truly see—to see this shared meal not as a mere snack to tide us over until Sunday dinner, but as the foretaste

of the heavenly banquet in which we share with the communion of saints throughout all time and space.

Here we are invited to let our **hearts be moved**, for as we lift up our hearts, we lift them up to the Lord. At this meal we begin to be moved, deep down in our gut, by the truth that we are not alone, that Christ is present with us in a real way, a way so real that it defies explanation.

Here we are invited to **respond**...to respond with our very lives. For as in this meal we share in the body of Christ, so too are we, the church, sent out into the world to be the body of Christ in this community and in all places where there is need. All places where our sisters and brothers lie beside the roads of life, waiting on someone to come and notice them. The invitation of our Lord to this table carries with it a call. And here we are invited to respond with joyful thanksgiving to the one who, though outcast by society, nonetheless stopped and looked on us with compassion, healed us, born the weight of our sins on the cross, and the cost of our brokenness in the tomb. At the dawn of the third day he was raised again, and he promises to return to us at the dawn of that Great Day.

So friends, knowing the power of the story, *God's Story*, let us prepare our hearts to come to the Table of the Kingdom. To Christ be all glory and honor now and forever. Amen.

ⁱ Luise Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, 134.

ⁱⁱ Schottroff, 131.

ⁱⁱⁱ Chris Henry, “Tell Me a Story,” sermon preached on *Day I*, July 11, 2010.