

“WHY ISN’T GOD MORE LIKE WHAT WE EXPECTED?”

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“Teacher, what need I do to inherit eternal life?” a lawyer asks Jesus. “Easy,” Jesus replies, “Love God with everything you’ve got and your neighbor as yourself.” “So who’s my neighbor?” the lawyer angles, like he has mastered that charge to love, like it’s small potatoes. Really? He’s good at love but cannot recognize his neighbor? It sounds like he is splitting out who is worthy of his love and who isn’t.

The lawyer asks Jesus a question. But instead of answering, Jesus tells a story. Try and hear this familiar parable today as though for the first time. A man on a risky road is robbed, beaten, and left for dead by a goon. He lies there bleeding, hurting, forsaken, and dying. Down the road comes a priest. But the priest, rather than helping, passes aloof on the other side. Jesus’ hearers already like how this story is shaping up. “Yeah, Jesus, get those creepy televangelists, those fatcat reality TV reverends, those stuck-up priests in their ivory towers. This is going to be *good!*” People enjoy bringing clergy down a few notches and it’s so very easy. For we’ll never equal the lofty ideals we profess. It’s like shooting fish in a barrel.

Then down the road walks a Levite, a lay leader from First Congregational, Jerusalem. He passes by the other side as well. “Great,” says the crowd. “Those Levites sitting in the front pew act so righteous. They think they invented church.”

But the man is still there in the ditch, abandoned, helpless, completely dependent upon others, if he is going to make it. The hot sun bears down on him. He has lost a lot of blood. He hears new footsteps approaching. Is this guy his last hope? He opens his eyes, blurred from his deep wound. What does he see? Is it someone from a mainline church, like him? Someone humble, sincere, faithful without being preachy, a man extraordinary in his ordinariness? Oh, no. It’s a Samaritan. “God no, not a Samaritan,” Jesus’ hearers all groan. “Samaritans are *the worst--* half-breed heretics who suck up to Rome. I’d rather *die* than have him touch me.”

You know the plot. A Samaritan risks his life as he stops on an unsafe road, rips up his suit to bind him, puts him in his Lexus, takes him to the inn, and foots the bill. The priest and Levite aren’t bad. They’re good and pious. But like the attorney, they are busy demarcating those worthy from those unworthy of saving love.

But let’s be honest. We all rationalize like this as we walk or drive by the broken. “You can’t help everyone in need, can you?...He must have done something to bring that beating on himself, to cause it...I’ve got my hands full looking after my own family. Doesn’t the Bible say, charity begins at home?...It is too dangerous to stop on the interstate with all the fast cars whizzing by...It’s illegal to pick up hitchhikers, did you know that?...As for me, I’ve got problems enough of my own.”

When we say the phrase “Good Samaritan,” we picture someone who volunteers at the Darien Community House, who donates to send the school band abroad. But those forms of giving lack the immediacy and riskiness of the real Samaritan. Often our giving lacks any real risk. It is cleverly designed to make us look good.

As a pastor in Ridgefield, our HS mission trip to Maine grew bigger and bigger every year. But I attended one year. And I was alarmed by youth mostly there to have it on their resume for college. They were not invested in the broken others. That doesn’t sound like the Samaritan Jesus described as good, who said to the innkeeper, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I’ll then repay you all of it.”

Jesus answers the lawyer’s query his own question. “Now think clearly, Mr. Seeker Searcher, who of the three along the sketchy road acted like a neighbor? I am not asking you how can *you* can be a neighbor to others. I am asking you, which of three—priest, Levite, or Samaritan—could *you* count on as a neighbor?”

The lawyer clearly dislikes Jesus turning the tables on him. After all, he’s a lawyer. He derives power by dictating the terms of their exchange. He wants to protest, “Hold on, Jesus. I asked who’s my neighbor, who should I love as myself. Answer *my* question first.” But he has never met someone with Jesus’ moral and spiritual authority. Someone so clever and practiced at forcing us to consider life on God’s terms rather than forcing him to give us answers reinforcing our biases.

The lawyer explores a blasphemous debate about worthy and unworthy victims. Jesus wasn’t about finishing foundations we already started, but paradigm shift. Jesus gives him a transforming parable about potential saviors, holy and unholy. Jesus forces us—the creatures—onto the terms God--the Creator-- has set forth.

Did you know that in the course of Jesus’ ministry he only answered 3 questions in the entirety of all four gospels? But in his ministry he asked 307 questions. The lawyer grudgingly replies, “The one with compassion. It was the Samaritan.”

The story is different than our impressions at first blush. It isn’t so much a story of a wounded man in a ditch whom we strong and good people treat charitably. The story is about three people who came down a road one day and only one was a neighbor. And the person who was a neighbor was a despised Samaritan.

Two of the faithful passed, a preacher, someone like me. A committed layperson, someone like you. The only one who stopped was...now fill in the blank with the name of someone you find easy to hate. Say, a member of Isis, that madman shooting up the Dallas police force, or the policeman who shot Philando Castile. Fill in the person whom you dread and despise the most. That’s the Samaritan. We’re in the ditch ready to expire, saying, “I’d rather die than have *you* save me.”

The lawyer wondered whom he might allow to be dependent upon his generosity. But Jesus turned him around and cast him in a position of his own dependency

and need for another who must take big risks, make sacrifices, and care for him. Surprise, the Other is the neighbor, the Outsider, who the lawyer saw as enemy.

Jesus' parables aren't about tweaking our resourceful lives to make us kinder. They instead take our lives apart to give us new wants, new needs, a new center. The parable of the Good Samaritan isn't about how we save the world by being good. It's the story how our God elected to save us through those we can't stand, including a Jesus whom the faithful deemed unworthy of respect or a fair hearing.

So it's a story of a strange God who we didn't expect and didn't want to save us. And when God tried to do so we rejected, defiled, violated, cursed and killed him. They said, "That poor, homeless rabbi can't be the Messiah. He doesn't match our hopes." Jesus was not the God we expected, or wanted. So we crucified him.

How many times did people—mostly religious people—reject Jesus saying: this guy welcomes prodigal sons back home; he forgives lowlife women; he admits thieves into paradise. Jesus always risked reaching out. He loved without guile. He sought undesirables beyond the polite social lines we so calculatedly draw up. Only to return resurrected to us---who betrayed him---to forgive us. What nerve!

So there you have it. Salvation comes from where we least expect it: outcasts like the Samaritans and a Savior like Jesus, uncertified, and constantly in trouble. Though he was God, he stooped down, washed feet, healed, and spread his arms on the cross in the widest embrace we'll ever know, "Father, forgive them."

Jesus tells the lawyer, not only does he not know who is neighbor is. He doesn't know who his God is. And he'd all better start there, if he expects to get very far. We come to church much as that lawyer approached Jesus, expecting that the message should be all about us. What do I have to do to get eternal life? How can I meet my needs? How can I approach life differently to be happier than I am? What is the best technique to lessen life's stresses, anxieties and boredom?

But the church, the Bible, the Lord's Table and the baptismal font are more about God than us. I thank God for that because, more than sprucing up our act a little, our need is much more radical and deep. For we are that hurting man in the ditch who isn't going to make it on our own, without a Savior's interceding. If you don't believe that, I wonder what headlines you've been reading recently. In case you didn't realize it, that's why you came to church today, not to fine tune your own efforts to save the world. But to meet and know this strange, saving God. Maybe he isn't the God you expected, the God you thought we should have, who would offer you a little advice, and then get out of your way, to save yourself. Instead this is the God you didn't expect, you couldn't invent, and you never saw coming.

Now you know why I retell the story of my preacher friend in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. After worship a lady waited in line to vent her agitation, "You should know you didn't meet one of my needs today. I found your sermon irrelevant." My friend is

southern, so rather than get grimly defensive, she launched a charm offensive, “Why, that’s no problem at all. I wasn’t trying to meet your needs or be relevant. I’m here to lift up the true and living God. Come back next week, we’ll try again. Maybe you’ll get it then.” I hope you heard me proclaim that God today. Amen.