

A Retelling of the Parable of the Samaritan

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Who Is Good?

...Jesus' plan of salvation, to use the language of tract writers, is even more subversive in the other story associated with [the] question ["what must I do to be saved?"] (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus told this parable in answer to a lawyer who Luke (the only evangelist to use this tale) tells us was moved not by genuine concern but by a desire to trap Jesus and cause a scandal. If this was the lawyer's intention, the Jesus walked deliberately into the trap, because the parable is a scandalous one: the parable of the good Samaritan.

We are so used to this story that we have fallen into the Sunday school habit of thinking of it as the story of the good (Samaritan) as opposed to the (good) Samaritan. But goodness as such is never talked about in the story. Jesus told it to answer a more concrete question: Who is my neighbor? in other words, Toward whom do I have social responsibilities?

Many illustrations could have been given in reply to this fairly conventional question. Indeed, the scripture expert (the meaning of "lawyer" in this context) may have posed it to locate Jesus among the various schools of Jewish interpretation then in flower. But Jesus answered it by turning the whole question upside down. His parable directs our attention not to the man who was robbed, the object of our neighborliness (though that is the use to which the parable is put nowadays: to remind us to be good to the needy). Instead, Jesus points to the identity of the person who saw the man as neighbor.

Therein lies the scandal, which our familiarity with the story has bleached out. The model held up to us for imitation is a Samaritan, that is, a rejecter of religious truth and practice; worse, a willful one. To recover the scandalousness of the parable, we might retell it by replacing the Samaritan with a gay man.

Many readers will immediately object that the two cases are not parallel: being a lesbian or a gay man is not like being a Samaritan; it is a deliberately chosen "lifestyle," not an ethnic identity. We will discover in chapters 1 and 2, however, as we examine the nature of lesbian and gay life and identity today, that this is a distinction without a difference. In the present context, it is more important to understand what a Samaritan was to the Jews of Jesus' time: a heretic. Samaritans were not

just people from Samaria; they were adherents of a religious system that was in active and bitter conflict with the Judaism of Jerusalem. Samaritans believed that the Jerusalem system had been tainted by Babylonian and Persian influences. By contrast, they “chose a lifestyle” based on rejection of any scripture beyond the Pentateuch, and they centered their worship not in Jerusalem but on Mount Gerizim.

Lesbians and gay men appear even more similar to Samaritans when we learn the sodomy has traditionally been associated with heresy. The English word “buggery” derives from the name of a sect known as Bulgars; under the alternate name of Albigensians, they were ruthlessly exterminated in a thirteenth-century war that amounted nearly to genocide. The medieval historian Michael Goodich, in discussing this association, notes the legal confusion cause (at least for today’s historians) by the imprecision of language in the laws of the period.

Jesus does not dwell on the scandal of the Samaritans’ chosen lifestyle, though; far from it. He instructs us to “go and do likewise.” Go and behave like a Samaritan? Like a heretic? Like a bugger?

Notice who ignored the injured traveler: a priest and a Levite, two religious professionals we might expect to be scrupulous in observing the commandments that Jesus has just summarized in the commandment to love one’s neighbor. Scrupulous they may have been, but their conventional religious training, their “goodness,” if you will, did not give them eyes to see the suffering of the mugging victim or did not move them to come to his assistance. But something impelled the Samaritan to act.

Why a Samaritan, exactly? Just to scandalize a smug lawyer? Perhaps; or perhaps to suggest that social choices, not abstract beliefs, are the nub of Jesus’ message.

I would like to offer a different explanation. Could it be that the rejection and contempt a Samaritan would have experienced in the Jewish heartland (the road between Jerusalem and Jericho) made him more aware of violence? Had he too been set upon and beaten by people who recognized from his style of dress that he was a heretic, as lesbians and gay men often are assaulted today by people who believe that by doing so they are cleaning up society? With these questions in mind, let us look again at the parable.

A traveler was going from Jerusalem to Jericho when some muggers attacked him. They not only took his money, they took his dignity too: they beat him up and stole his clothes, then ran away, leaving him half-dead in the gutter.

Soon a bishop came by. He was on his way home after going to Jerusalem to pick up a car given to him by a Cadillac dealer there, who was one of the biggest financial supporters of the diocese. The car rode

beautifully, and the bishop particularly appreciated the cream-colored glove-leather upholstery. A little luxurious, perhaps, but after all (the bishop was thinking as he took the curve just beyond Bethany), good quality wears better than shoddy goods. In the long run, what looks like luxury is prudence.

Just beyond the curve, where the road descends to the Jordan Valley, he noticed something piled beside the road. “Litterbugs” was his first thought, but when he got closer, he could see it was a body. He slowed to see more, wondering if he should stop, and noticed that whoever it was had been beaten and was bleeding. He didn’t really want blood all over the interior of his new car, but somehow that seemed like a petty reason not to stop. Then he realized that the person was naked. That settled it; it would never do for a bishop to be seen with a naked person in his car. Think of the scandal! Preserving the good name of the church was more important than any passing act of charity, especially in times when the institution was under attack from wild, semi-educated preachers from the backwoods—and trying to keep the goodwill of the colonial administration, too. Anyway, this was a job for the social service professionals. Their agencies got a lot of funding from the diocese. It wasn’t as if the bishop weren’t helping, indirectly. He drove on.

Fortunately, this being a main route for travelers, it wasn’t more than a quarter hour before another car came along. It was driven by a prominent layman, active in the local church and in an organization devoted to restoring religious values to a community that needed them desperately during a period of moral decay and spiritual uncertainty. Noticing what looked like a body beside the road, he too slowed down to find out more. The body, which was bloody and naked, wasn’t moving—for the mugged traveler had fainted.

The layman, like the bishop, wondered if he should stop and do something. After all, he was someone concerned about his community, not just a person caught up in his own well-being. This might prove an opening to evangelize this poor soul who, judging from his naked condition, undoubtedly knew not the Lord. But when the person still didn’t move, the laymen began to have second thoughts. What if the man was already dead? The police would involve him in all kinds of legal red tape. He didn’t have time for that; he had more important work. And what if the man lived but sued the layman afterward, claiming he was liable for something or other that happened on the way to the hospital? You couldn’t be too careful. Besides, why wasn’t the man wearing anything? Robbers don’t steal people’s clothes. This guy must have done something to provide the beating. Probably made some kind of disgusting proposition to the wrong person, a healthy if hotheaded young football player perhaps, who did what any man would do in response to a filthy suggestion. Overreacted, of course, but boys will be boys. This guy must have deserved what he got. A God-fearing layman like himself couldn’t be

going around with low-life scum; it would drag the reputation of his lay ministry through the mud.

The promoter of religious values drove on, too. This time it was only a few minutes before the next person happened by.

A certain gay man was returning home after being summoned to his head office Jerusalem. He had been fired because of a rumor that he was gay. As he drove, he wondered if he should have denied the rumor. No, he decided, it wouldn't have done any good. The truth would have come out anyway, when he went into court to testify against the gay-basher who had beaten his lover to death last month. Unconsciously he rubbed the dent in his own skull left by a similar incident he had suffered three years previously.

Suddenly he noticed what looked like a body beside the road. Stopping the car, he jumped out and rushed to look. A naked man, covered with blood and bruises. They looked a lot like the ones he had seen on Adam's body when he had found him in the alley outside their building. Obviously, this man too had been mugged, and judging from the fact that the muggers took all of his clothes, the gay man figured it couldn't have been a simple robbery. He felt for a pulse: the man was still alive. Adam had not been; there had been nothing left to do for him. He was being given a chance to make up now for his helplessness then.

He rushed back to his car, returned with the first aid kit, and did what was needed to transport the man safely. Then he drove him to the nearest emergency room. Because the man had no clothes and there was no way the admissions clerk could tell whether he had insurance, the gay man wrote a blank check to the hospital and promised to come back the next day to clear up whatever else might need to be taken care of.

Later, the newspapers got hold of the story and came to interview him. The bishop read the story and called a press conference, at which he announced that the diocese was giving its Good Samaritan Award to the man who had helped the mugging victim he himself had driven past.

At the award banquet, held at the episcopal palace, the bishop stood with his arm around the Good Samaritan and gave a little homily about showing mercy to our neighbor in distress. This act, he concluded, showed a true Christian spirit. He turned to the man and shook his hand, adding, "God will bless you abundantly for this."

"Oh, I didn't do it for religious reasons. It just seemed like the human thing to do. I haven't been to church since my priest refused me absolution when I confessed I was in love with the redheaded guy who was captain of the wrestling team." The gay man smiled at the cameras.

The bishop was trying to figure out how to deal with the question he knew was coming next.

Could this parable, far from being a conventional tale about the importance of loving our neighbor, be telling us instead that it is the oppressed, the heretic, the bugger that we must go for teaching, rather than resting in the conventional pieties dispensed by the usual professionals? Can Jesus be saying that suffering oppression brings understanding that the religiously “good,” who are revered in society and thus immune from the reality of hatred and violence, can never share.

Such a suspicion is reinforced by the parable’s location in the order of Luke’s narrative. It is preceded by a passage where Jesus tells the disciples that the truth is hidden from the (conventionally) wise (Luke 10:23-24). It is followed by one where Jesus not only challenges the categories of ethnicity and religious status, as he just has in receiving the report of the seventy and in the wisdom-of-the-innocents passage, along with the parable of the Samaritan, but breaks the rules of gender as well (10:38-42). Here, in the story of Martha and Mary, someone who has been considered unfit to receive religious teaching—a woman—is welcomed by Jesus. This complements his lesson that heretics have more to teach us than priests and Levites and experts in the law. ...