

# Who Is My Neighbour?

## Luke 10:25-37

*Adapted from an article by Debie Thomas*

There is a wonderful Jewish scholar, Amy-Jill Levine, whose mission in life is to help us as Christians understand how the people of Jesus' time would have heard his teaching. She adapts a quote first used about newspapers and suggests that religion is meant "to comfort the afflicted... and to afflict the comfortable." She says that we should think of the parables of Jesus as doing this afflicting, just as in the Old Testament, the prophets speak truth to power. She says, "Therefore, if we hear a parable and think, 'I really like that' or, worse, fail to take any challenge, we are not listening well enough."

The difficulty for me (and I assume, for many Christians) is that Jesus' parables are familiar and beloved, so much so that I don't experience them as afflictions or as provocative. I know many of them inside out and backwards — and therein lies the great danger: they no longer challenge me. I read, I nod, and I walk away. The parables I love most don't lay me bare.

The Gospel reading for this week — the parable of the Good Samaritan — presents exactly this dilemma. I learned the story in Sunday School, as many of you probably did. A man got robbed and was left for dead, a priest and a Levite passed him by, and a Samaritan stopped and helped. The Samaritan, showing mercy, exemplified neighbourliness. I should do likewise.

What, I wonder now, would Jesus' original audience make of my glib reading?

Would they agree with it? Surely there's nothing wrong with reading the Good Samaritan parable as a "go and do likewise" story. After all, we are called as imitators of Christ to assist, to show concern, and to offer compassionate care to those in need. The Good Samaritan offers us a beautiful example to follow, and we would do well to pay attention. But is that *it*? Is that all the "afflicting" that this story has for us? Or did Jesus have something more provocative in mind?

Perhaps it will help to place the story in a fuller context. As Luke tells it, a lawyer approaches Jesus with a million dollar question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" I know that scholars often give the lawyer a bad rap for testing Jesus, but I like the boldness of his question. He wants to live fully. He's not messing around in the shallows with his query; he's deep-sea diving. "Show me the good stuff, Jesus. Show me the path to eternal life."

But Jesus is too savvy a teacher to answer the question directly, so he turns it back on his would-be student: "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" The lawyer (no fool himself) gives Jesus a concise and inspiring, A+ answer: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and you shall love your neighbour as yourself." Jesus congratulates the lawyer on his doctrinal precision: "You have given the right answer," and encourages him to take the essential next step: "Do this, and you will live." But the lawyer — miffed, perhaps, that Jesus wants more than textbook theology — asks for further clarification. "Who is my neighbour?" Or, to put it crassly: "Who is not my neighbour? How much love are we talking here, Jesus? Can you be specific? Where can I draw the line? Outside my front door? At the edges of my neighbourhood? Along the cultural and racial boundaries I was raised with? I mean, there *are* lines... aren't there?"

I assume the lawyer would have loved to discuss *ad nauseum* the finer points of responsible neighbourliness. What better way to put off getting his hands dirty than to talk theory for hours? But Jesus doesn't take the bait. Instead he tells a story. A story whose main character we know so well that we've named hospitals, nursing homes, relief agencies and philanthropic organizations after him. Here in Australia, and in other countries with a legal inheritance from English common law, he even has a law coined in his honour: any modern-day "good samaritan" who stops to help a stranger along the road will enjoy certain legal protections for his trouble.

As Jesus tells it, a man was walking down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked by bandits. They robbed, beat, stripped, and left him for dead. Soon afterwards, a priest came by. Seeing the wounded man, he passed by on the other side of the road. A short while later, a Levite did likewise. But then a Samaritan came along. Seeing the stranded victim, he drew close, and felt great pity. He bandaged the man's wounds, anointed them with oil and wine, carried him to the nearest inn on his own animal, paid the innkeeper for the victim's further care, and promised to return with more money as needed. "So. Which of the three was a neighbour to the man who was robbed?" Jesus asks the lawyer at the conclusion of the story. "The one who showed him mercy," the lawyer replies. "Go and do likewise," Jesus says again. "Do this and you will live." *Do this. Draw close. Show mercy. Extend kindness. Live out your theology in hands-on care for other people. Don't just think love. Do it.*

And maybe that's the challenge that can afflict us. We can feel like it is all up to us and that we often fall very, very short. I think it can help at these times to remember that our God has first had mercy on us. We are able to love, because first God has shown mercy, reaching down to us in the ditch, lost and beaten in the journey. And maybe this is a helpful position from which to look again at this parable.

You see, the story changes, I think, depending on where we locate ourselves within it. If you're like me, you might have good days and bad days: you probably locate yourself in the priest and the Levite on bad days, and in the Good Samaritan on better ones. Sometimes you see a need and you pass it by because you're too busy or preoccupied. Too afraid, overwhelmed, or exhausted to care. But the Good Samaritan is still the ideal you hope to achieve. He is your example. He's the goal to strive towards.

Unless he's not meant to be the goal. What if he's not? What if Jesus's parable is more than an *example* story? What if it's a *reversal* story? A story intended to upset our categories of good and bad, sacred and profane, benefactor and recipient? If we too easily and comfortably identify with the Good Samaritan in this parable, maybe we're missing the point. Maybe the whole point of the Samaritan is that he is *not us*.

At the time Jesus told this story, the enmity between the Jews and the Samaritans was ancient, entrenched, and bitter. The two groups disagreed about everything that mattered: how to honour God, how to interpret the Scriptures, and where to worship. They practised their faith in separate temples, read different versions of the Torah, and avoided social contact with each other whenever possible. Truth be told, they hated each other's guts. Though we're inclined to love the Good Samaritan, Jesus's choice to make him the hero of his story was nothing less than shocking to first century ears. After all, he was the Other. The enemy of the Jews. The object of their fear, their condescension, their disgust, and their judgment. He was the heretical outcast. Maybe Jesus was calling them to put aside the history they knew, and the prejudices they nursed. He was asking them to leave room for divine surprises – God's surprising actions that change the world.

Perhaps, in order to hear this parable with fresh ears we need to locate ourselves, not in the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan, but in the wounded man, dying on the road. Notice that he is the only character in the story not defined by profession, social class, or religious belief. He has no identity

at all except naked need. Maybe we have to occupy his place in the story first — become the broken one, grateful to anyone at all who will show us mercy — before we can feel the unbounded compassion of the Good Samaritan. Why? Because all tribalisms fall away on the broken road. All divisions of "us" and "them" disappear of necessity. When you're lying bloody in a ditch, what matters is not whose help you'd prefer, whose way of practising Christianity you like best, whose politics you agree with. What matters is whether or not anyone will stop to show you mercy before you die.

Perhaps for you, it hasn't happened yet — your encounter on that dark road — but it will. Somehow, someday, somewhere, it will. For many of us it already has. Perhaps in a hospital room, at a graveside, after a marriage fails, when a cherished job goes bust — the storm, the betrayal, the injury, the diagnosis. Somehow, someday, somewhere. For all of us. It will happen. When it does, God comes to us in our brokenness, in our woundedness. God comes to us — through Jesus, through communion, through the Word, and through our neighbour.

"Who is my neighbour?" the lawyer asked. Your neighbour is the one who scandalizes you with compassion, Jesus answered. Your neighbour is the one who upends all the entrenched categories, and shocks you with a fresh face of God. Your neighbour is the one who mercifully steps over the ancient, bloodied line separating "us" from "them," and brings God's love and compassion to you.

Hmmm... a person who breaks categories, is inclusive, and brings God's love.

Sounds a bit like Jesus, doesn't it.

God comes to us in ways that constantly surprise us, and can challenge us.

And, God's love is constantly reaching down to us in our places of pain and brokenness. May God's compassion encircle your heart today, bringing you healing and binding up your wounds, so that you can bring this healing to others.

Amen.