

Proper 10 (C)

Lk 10.25-37

I'm going to go out on a limb and begin by suggesting that I think we've been getting this one wrong. Maybe that's a little too strong. Maybe it's better to say we're not getting this one completely right: more often than not, we're missing something in our reading of this story.

The story of the good Samaritan is of course one of the best known and best loved of the parables of Jesus, and it's not hard to see why.

Every story needs a villain, and this story has no fewer than three villains: we've got a self-righteous lawyer, a hypocritical priest, and a heartless Levite.

Every story needs a hero, and this story has at least two heroes: there's Jesus, who shows up the self-righteous lawyer who tries to challenge him, and of course there's a Samaritan, a compassionate, generous, *good* Samaritan.

Every story needs a crisis and a resolution, and this story has two crises and two very satisfying resolutions. There's the crisis presented by the self-righteous lawyer, which Jesus resolves by demonstrating the priority of mercy. And there's the crisis within the parable itself: a man set upon by robbers and then saved by the goodness of his Samaritan neighbor.

When we read this story in this way, we usually end up with something like a morality play: we project whatever negative qualities we want on to the priest and the Levite, and we commend the Samaritan for his compassion, or his generosity, or his hospitality, or whatever good qualities we want to associate with him.

That's fine as far as it goes, but I dare say it's probably not the way those who first heard this story would have heard it. At least, that's not *all* they would have heard. That way of understanding this story doesn't do full justice to the way the story functions in Luke's gospel. There's more going on here. In order to recognize the fuller meaning of this story, we have to look at two things: we have to look at the *motive* of the lawyer who tried to test Jesus, and we have to look at the *setting* of the parable itself.

So, first, the motive of the lawyer who tried to test Jesus: this is easy, because Luke tells us what the lawyer is after. He wanted to "justify himself." The Greek word here for "justify" is "*dikaioō*," which comes from the term "*dikaios*." To be *dikaios* is to be right, to be just, to be honest, even to be innocent. In other words, the lawyer is seeking reassurance; he wants the security that comes from knowing he has done what he could reasonably be expected to do.

Now let's look at the second thing we need to recognize the fuller meaning of this story, the setting of the parable itself. This is the piece I think we usually miss. "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho." This is not accidental; Jesus chose that setting for a reason.

Jericho is a city that's located about seventeen miles northeast of Jerusalem. Jericho is also more

than 3,000 feet *below* Jerusalem: Jerusalem sits on a mountain about 2,500 feet above sea level, and Jericho sits about 850 feet below sea level. So the journey from Jerusalem to Jericho is a rather precipitous one, straight down a mountain. The Jewish historian Josephus, writing around the time of Jesus, described the region between the two cities as “desolate and rocky.” Three hundred years later, Saint Jerome reported that even in his time the region was still plagued by marauders who would hijack travellers. The road between Jerusalem and Jericho was so dangerous that it was known as the “Way of Blood.”

This setting is intended to influence the way we think about the behavior of the characters in the story Jesus tells. The man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho would have certainly known that he was undertaking a difficult and dangerous journey; he was not out for a pleasant walk in the countryside. More to the point, how does the setting affect the way we think about the behavior of the priest and the Levite? They, too, would have known they were making a difficult and dangerous journey, and they would have been anxious to get down that mountain and to the safety of Jericho as quickly as possible. You didn’t want to be caught on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho after dark: you got up early, left as soon as it was daylight, and hoped to heaven you made it to Jericho before the sun went down.

So the priest and the Levite would have had any number of good reasons for justifying their decision not to help the man who fell into the hands of robbers. Maybe that guy lying in the ditch over there is faking it; maybe he’s a decoy meant to distract me long enough for his buddies to sneak up behind me. Or maybe he’s *not* faking it, and maybe the guys who did that to him are still nearby and will do the same thing to me if I don’t keep moving. Or maybe he’s already dead and it’s too late for me to do anything. Even if I *did* try to help him, he’s obviously in no condition to walk so he would just slow me down, and I’ve got to keep moving or *I’m* going to be in trouble. No matter which of those scenarios you choose, none of them are good options; up there on the mountain, the rule of the road is every man for himself. All of this is only to say that the setting of the story makes the behavior of the priest and the Levite justifiable.

How does the setting of the story affect the way we think about the behavior of the Samaritan? It’s not so much his generosity or his hospitality or even his compassion that stands out, it’s his willingness to put himself in harm’s way. In the midst of a situation in which he could have easily justified a decision to walk away, he didn’t. He stopped, and he cared for the injured man, and he took on the burden of carrying this injured fellow traveller to safety, and he made sure the man would be cared for after they arrived. We call this the parable of the good Samaritan, but we could just as easily call it the parable of the brave Samaritan, the fearless Samaritan, maybe even the foolhardy Samaritan.

This deeper reading of the parable invites us to rethink the conversation Jesus has with the lawyer who sought to test him. What was the lawyer trying to do? He wanted to “justify himself.” He wanted to know that he was right, that he was just, that he was innocent. He was seeking reassurance. He wanted the security that comes from knowing he has done what he could reasonably be expected to do.

And what does Jesus tell the lawyer to do? Don’t worry about protecting yourself. Don’t try and rest in the security of knowing you’ve done all you can reasonably be expected to do. The

kingdom of heaven is not to be found by playing it safe; the kingdom of heaven is about being willing to risk it all for someone who desperately needs your help.

This is entirely consistent with something else we see unfolding in this section of Luke's gospel. Right around this time in his ministry, Jesus begins for the first time to teach his disciples that he is going to be betrayed and killed. Jesus is increasingly shown to be the one willing to put himself in harm's way, the one who is motivated less by concern for his own well-being and more by concern for the well-being of others, the one willing to risk it all for the sake of a world that desperately needed his help.

Oftentimes, the ways we think about goodness or righteousness or compassion are designed to protect us. They're designed to comfort us and to reassure us that we're good people. They're intended to enable us to justify ourselves before God and one another that we're doing the best we can, that we're doing everything that can reasonably be expected of us.

This morning, Jesus puts before us a rather unsettling challenge: don't worry about protecting yourself. Don't try and rest secure in the knowledge you've done all you can reasonably be expected to do. The kingdom of heaven is not to be found by playing it safe; the kingdom of heaven is about being willing to risk it all for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of the world.

Each of us needs to ask what that might look like within the context of our individual lives. We each have different opportunities, we each have different insecurities, we each have different opportunities to put ourselves in the kinds of places where danger is real. Believe me, there is more than enough danger to go around, and there are more than enough injured travellers out there in need of our help.

Some of us are called to help those whose bodies have been broken; some are called to help those whose hearts have been shattered, or whose minds have been damaged, or whose wills have been crushed. And part of the challenge we face has to do with the fact that those we try and help will often be anxious to justify themselves, to reassure themselves that it's alright that they're broken or crushed. Part of our challenge involves helping them recognize Jesus calls them to risk whatever sense of security they have on a higher form of freedom, a better way of living, a more genuine way of being.

We not only need to ask what it means for us to risk it all in our individual lives, we also need to ask what this might mean for ourselves as a community of faith. Do we as a community try to justify ourselves? What are the markers we use to reassure and protect our sense of who we are? How might Jesus be calling us to risk it all for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of the world around us?

I will be the first to admit these are not easy questions to answer. God doesn't give us a road map. The only advice Jesus gave to the lawyer who tried to justify himself was to "go and do likewise." What does that mean, exactly? Was the guy supposed to camp out on the side of the mountain along the road between Jerusalem and Jericho and wait for hapless travellers to be mugged by bandits? I'm guessing that's not what Jesus had in mind. Following where Jesus leads often requires careful discernment and patient listening.

But I also think we're also given clues along the way, and one of the most important clues we're given is that feeling of wanting to justify ourselves. You know that feeling you get when you become anxious to demonstrate you're in the right, when you look for reassurance that all is well, when you feel the need to scramble for a little safety and security?

The next time you feel that way, stop and look around; chances are there's someone lying in a ditch somewhere nearby. When you find yourself in that situation, remember the fearless Samaritan, and remember especially the one who risked it all for your sake and for the sake of the world, the one who protects us in the midst of every danger and who picks us up and carries us to safety and who shows us every mercy. Then go, and do likewise.

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