

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 10:25-37

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The parable of the Good Samaritan is the quintessential Jesus parable. It has probably had more impact than any single story of Jesus. Many people have taken the story to heart and have acted on it. All you have to do is look at the number of hospitals called "Good Samaritan" to see how much impact this story has had. Indeed, one of the contexts in which to think about this story is the current debate on health care and the structures of healthcare that are built into Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God. Through this parable he advocates the extension of health care even to enemies, let alone those who don't have enough money.

So Jesus' story is about the extension of the gifts of the kingdom of God to everyone. It is set in the context of Jesus' journey through Samaria and the long history of conflict between Jews and Samaritans. It follows the peace mission of the seventy in the towns of Samaria.

The mnemonic structure of this story is relatively easy to identify. There are first of all the two episodes of the setting, each of which has the same structure: a question or statement by the lawyer, in the first case a question and in the second case his answer to Jesus, and then Jesus' response to him. In the first episode, the lawyer asks, "**What** must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asks a question back, "**What's** written in the law, what do you read?" He responds, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind and your neighbor as yourself," and then Jesus says, "You have given the right answer; do this and you will live."

The next episodes are an expansion of that initial structure. The lawyer again asks Jesus a question, "Who is my neighbor?" and Jesus' response is the parable, the next three episodes. The first episode of the parable is the description of the setting: the man who fell into the hands of the robbers. The second is the priest and the Levite, and the third is the Samaritan. The Samaritan episode is by far the longest episode in the whole story.

The end of the story is Jesus' question to the lawyer again, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor?" The lawyer answers, "The one who showed him mercy." The order of the dialogue is reversed in this last episode; Jesus asks the question, the lawyer responds and Jesus gives the last comment. If you think of the story in that way, it will help you to remember. The story is very familiar and the parable is not hard to learn.

In the episode of the lawyer's first response, notice that the order is heart, soul, strength, and mind. It is arranged in parallel phrases which makes it easy to remember. Sometimes I find it helpful to identify a word that will have the first letters of a series like this. So if you think of HSSM(ind): heart, soul, strength, and mind and then neighbor at the end, you've got it.

This is a story of repartee, dialogue, and exchange between two men who on the one hand respect each other; on the other hand, the lawyer is testing Jesus. The spirit of this test is not necessarily one of conflict. It isn't adversarial in the sense of being hostile. It may be more like a doctoral exam in which the lawyer is testing Jesus in relation to his knowledge and his understanding of things. Jesus' voice in response is not condescending or even critical, but rather engaging.

The audio structure of the story is that it has two crescendos. The first one is the response of the lawyer. It's not a major crescendo but it has that energy: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself." And Jesus said, "You have given the right answer. Do this and you shall live."

The second crescendo occurs with the description of the Samaritan. It begins quietly: "A Samaritan while traveling came near him; when he saw him he was moved to pity." And it gradually becomes louder and faster. He went to him, bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine, put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, took care of him, and the next day took out two denari and gave them to the inn keeper and said to him, "Take care of him and when I come back, I'll repay you whatever more you spend." The story expresses the extraordinary extent to which the Samaritan went to help his enemy.

The structure of this story, in terms of its sound, is like the structure of the sermon that Wyatt T. Walker described once in a great lecture he gave on preaching. He said a sermon is like a plane that takes off and it keeps going higher and higher until it reaches its peak and then it gradually comes back down and lands. This parable has that structure. It builds up to the peak of the Samaritan saying, "When I come back I'll repay whatever more you spend," and then it comes back down to rest with "Jesus said to him, 'Go and do like wise.'" Think of the structure of the sound in the story in this way. I think that's the way Jesus told it.

What's going on in the story? The lawyer's question is about inheriting eternal life and Jesus' response is to ask him to answer his own question, "What's written in the law? What do you read there?" Interestingly, the lawyer's answer is exactly what Jesus teaches in other places in the tradition: the combination of loving the Lord your God with all your heart from the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-6), and of your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18). This is Jesus' distinctive teaching. In Mark, it is Jesus who answers the lawyer, "You shall love the Lord your God...and your neighbor as yourself." (Mark 12:31)

In Luke it is the lawyer who gives this good answer. It's as if he had already heard Jesus talking and responded with the same distinctive combination of the most important parts of the law. And Jesus' answer to him is highly affirmative: "You have given the right answer. Do this and you will live...forever."

What would the listeners have understood from this parable? First, they knew that the Jericho road was a dangerous road. In the first century, the Jericho road was legendary as

being one of the most dangerous places. That was because of its character. It was a road where, if you were going from Jericho up to Jerusalem, you go up some four to five thousand feet. It was all wilderness and caves where people can hide out. There was no protection, no police force on the roads in those days. Bands of robbers lived in those caves and whoever came down the road was fair game.

Jesus' listeners expected that the priest and the Levite would see a fellow Jew who had been injured and would help him. However, the law for priests and Levites was very strict in regard to their contracting uncleanness by touching a corpse. So the probable reason why the priest and the Levite would have gone by on the other side is not necessarily that they were indifferent or didn't care about the man, but that they were observing the law. The only dead person they could contact was a member of their own family (without contracting uncleanness). If they contracted uncleanness from a corpse they would be disqualified from serving in the Temple. And an assumption of the story is that were serving in the Temple, since they were coming up the road going up to Jerusalem.

The Samaritan was from the point-of-view of Judeans, an apostate. He was a renegade, an enemy of the first-order. The Samaritans were descendents of the residents of the Northern Kingdom that was conquered by the Assyrians some 800 years before Jesus, 722 B.C.E. specifically. The Assyrian policy was to intermarry, so the Assyrians had sent young men and women into the Northern Kingdom to intermarry with the people there, who were then regarded by their Southern brethren as half-breeds, as ones who were defiled by their blood and were no longer Jews.

Luke's audience knew about the long history of conflict with the Samaritans. Not long before Jesus' day, a group of young Samaritans broke into the Temple and spread bones all over the Temple on the day before the celebration of Passover and unleavened bread. The Jews had to cancel the festival for that year. That action of defiling the Temple was held as an indictment of Samaritans and as justification for acts of retribution against Samaritans by Judeans. Samaritans continued to carry out acts of violence against Judeans who were traveling through Samaria. The relationship was not unlike the current relationship of Jews and Palestinians, who incidentally, live on much of the same land as the Samaritans did.

So for Jesus' listeners, this Samaritan was an enemy of the first-order, a hated one who did not observe the law, who is regarded as being unrighteous. But, this Samaritan, when he comes, treats the injured traveler with extraordinary kindness. For him to patch him up and even to take him to an inn was good; but to take out two denarii and give them to an innkeeper with a promise to repay whatever more he would spend, this is beyond all expectations of kindness to someone who was beaten and robbed. He is an extraordinary neighbor.

Now on the one hand, this is a story about the extraordinary grace of the Kingdom of God. It is an example of the extension of care to an enemy. Implicit in this story is not

only the goodness of caring for those who have been hurt, but also the goodness of breaking the cycle of violence, retribution, and revenge that happens in relationships between people who are in conflict with each other. The only way to peace is if that cycle is broken. The Samaritan creates peace by breaking the cycle of retribution and violence. That is what the Kingdom of God is all about. A neighbor is one who cares for his friends and his enemies.

Jesus' question to the lawyer at the end is, "Which of these three do you think was neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" His response is straightforward, not disgruntled that he was put down or shown up. He simply states what is obvious from Jesus' parable: "The one who showed mercy." Jesus' final response is also not a put-down, but rather a recommendation and an answer to the lawyer's initial question: "Go and do likewise and you will inherit eternal life." To paraphrase: Go and care for your neighbor and for your enemies and you'll inherit eternal life.

Jesus' response to this lawyer who is testing him becomes a test for the lawyer. And it's a fair test. It is an opportunity for everyone who identifies with the lawyer and with Jesus to think about what is it that constitutes righteousness that will lead to eternal life, to one's spirit living forever. This is the spirit of extraordinary grace and kindness toward everyone, including our enemies. That's the way to the kingdom of God, a kingdom of peace.