Ordinary C 15 July 13, 2025

You've heard this one lots of times, right? Please give me a few minutes to say something new about this very familiar gospel.

This was a hot topic in Israel: How can I win life in the world to come?

Sadducees didn't believe in eternal life in a world to come, because they couldn't find it in the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, the only ones they accepted as the Word of God.

The Pharisees whole-heartedly looked forward to the Resurrection of all the dead, which prophets such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and Hosea had proclaimed.

But you remember, Luke is writing for a non-Jewish audience of Greeks and Romans; so, Luke has Jesus using the Greek Socratic method to pose a question back to him. "How do you read the Law?"

Rightly, the scholar says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

Here maybe is the first new thing: the scholar quotes Hebrew scripture but adds "with all your mind."

For Jewish scripture, the heart is the center of intellectual life; and your guts, your bowels, are the center of emotional life;

but in the Greek world, thinking, the mind, is located in the head; so Luke is reminding his gentile listeners that the intellectual life is also to be dedicated to God.

Jesus credits the scholar's answer as correct in quoting scripture, even with that addition. This is a very high standard, perhaps impossible to meet: can anyone constantly love God and neighbor?

And if that's the bar, then who can be saved? The gospel will assert, With God nothing is impossible. But how God saves will save will surprise, as the parable and St. Paul will reveal.

The scholar wants to justify himself, that is, he wants to be saved and accepted before God; so, he then asks a trick question: Who is my neighbor?

The scholar is pretty sure who ISN'T his neighbor: gentiles and Samaritans.

If Jesus now asks the question, "How do you read the Law as to who is your neighbor?" this scholar would say that his neighbor is one who keeps the food laws and the Sabbath regulations and the other 613 mitzvot found in the Torah.

But Jesus isn't Socrates. He doesn't ask another question, until later. Instead, he tells the parable. And ultimately, he becomes the parable of God's self-revelation.

This is the only parable in which Jesus has a specific geographical identification: the road from Jerusalem to Jericho.

Why? Ponder this with me and see if I add anything else new to your grasp of this familiar story.

The imagery of the parable is taken from the 6th chapter of the prophet Hosea. Hosea depicts a band of temple priests, like brigands lying in wait, who murder on the road to Shechem.

Shechem was near Mount Gerizim, where the Samaritans had their temple. So, in Hosea, the murderous band would have been Samaritan priests, and so too their Levites; and then, if Jesus is a good Jewish rabbi, his parable should have as its hero a good, pious Jew who would help the victim. Exactly the kind of folks who are listening this parable.

But Jesus shifts the story away from Shechem to the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, to underscore that the priests and Levites in his story are religiously observant Jews.

The man was on his way down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Was he a Jew? Had he been there to offer sacrifices in temple? The parable offers no such details, because none of that matters to the question about being a neighbor.

The robbers beat him unconscious and strip him. Why?

Speech and clothes are the two ways you can identify people. In this area at least nine languages are spoken, so if the man can't speak, he can't identify himself as a Jew or a Samaritan or a gentile. And clothing would tell an observer what tribe he belonged to and where he was from.

And if he's lying face down, no one could tell whether he was circumcised, a Jew.

You perhaps have heard that the priest is travelling in the same direction, away from Jerusalem, so he could make no excuse about incurring ritual impurity. He has finished his temple duties, so he could in fact help.

But it's more complicated than that. The priest knows he has an obligation to help, if the Law covers this case. But if he gets close to the victim and discovers the man is dead, the priest will be obliged ritually to rent his robes, tear them, in a sign of grief. Those robes are valuable. And he will be defiled, so he will have to go back to Jerusalem and undergo ritual purification for a week. He could end up losing maybe a month's salary.

No doubt, this priest would be looking for a way to observe the Law, because he wants to do what the Law commands. But if the victim is one of "them," and not one of "us," he will have paid a great cost for maybe a dead Samaritan or gentile, someone he does not deem his "neighbor." And he doesn't think the Law does, either.

Though the Levite and the priest are both "clergy," the Levite has lesser responsibilities, so his defilement would have fewer consequences. Perhaps he accepts the priest's action as legitimizing his own decision.

But the Pharisees hearing this parable would be horrified by the priest and the Levite.

After all, the victim might be a fellow Jew, and they should make an exception in order to fulfill the entirety of the Law.

But now the real twist to the parable. Those hearing Jesus up to this point presume that the hero of the story will be one of their own, a pious layman. And then the parable would be a not-so-subtle jab at the religious establishment at the Temple; snarky remarks about the "clergy" are always a delightful past time.

But the hero is not a pious Jewish layman; the hero is a hated Samaritan, a half-breed, the last one they would have anticipated. By definition, a Samaritan is someone who doesn't understand properly anything about God's Law.

In fact, in the gospel of John, Jesus himself gets called a Samaritan, one possessed by the evil one, because his opponents consider him a "bad rabbi."

In the parable, the Samaritan, with oil and wine, cleans and disinfects the wounds, which is exactly what God does in Hosea 6—indeed, Hosea 6 says "God will bind our wounds; he will revive us after two days; on the third day he will raise us up to live in his presence."

The original hearers of this parable would miss that reference, but the disciples of the risen Lord Jesus would understand it immediately. You did!

One more thing: taking the man to an inn and caring for him was risky for the Samaritan:

those at the inn would likely jump to the conclusion that the one who beat and robbed the victim was the Samaritan himself!

Picture an analogous scene from our own Wild West: an Indian comes into town with a wounded man thrown over his horse and an arrow sticking out of his back. Even if the Indian seems to be caring for the man, whom do you think the locals are going to blame for the arrow in his back?

So, it's risky to act like a neighbor.

Yet that's the risk Jesus himself takes; he comes to rescue us yet gets blamed for being a bad rabbi, a blasphemer; he pays a price for his compassion.

The letter to the church at Colossae, our second reading, proclaims that Christ Jesus has bound up our wounds, reconciled us, precisely by his risky choice to become one of us in order to be neighbor to us. And that choice led him to the Cross. And it is by the blood of his Cross that he made peace for us with God. That's the blood of his new Covenant which we will celebrate again shortly.

Jesus ends the parable with another question, one that undercuts the scholar's assumptions. Not, "Who is my neighbor?" but "Which of these three was neighbor to the robbers' victim?" And that question resounds in the hearts and minds and guts of everyone who hears this parable. How does it sound in your own heart and mind and guts today?

Thanks for listening. Stay wonderful.