

Pressing the Questions

Luke 10:25-37

July 11, 2010 J. S. O'Neill

When I was younger and thought more simplistically about things, I considered the parable of the Good Samaritan a fairly straight-forward story. Of course, at that same time in my life I thought there were simple solutions to life's problems, that people could generally be divided into good guys and bad guys, and that the problem of evil was largely the result of people simply not loving one another enough.

Now that more years have accumulated under my ever-tightening belt, and I am more informed and honest about the human heart, including my own, the more complex I realize this parable is and the more maddening it becomes. After all, this story is about all of us, but particularly pointed at people like me. After all, the priest and the Levite in the story are religious officials. And the lawyer who asks Jesus the question treats him like a clergyman, and clergy are supposed to be able to have at the tip of their theological tongues pithy answers to questions like, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Life is a complex and mysterious affair. These days, in order to handle life's complexities, we rely on brokers, middlemen. Health is brokered through medical personnel, information through books and internet, music through recordings. Once upon a time, life was a more immediate experience. Primitive humanity learned through direct experience, but life is too complex to do that now. If we couldn't depend upon others' expertise in order to learn and thrive, we'd still be living in the Stone Age.

But brokered experience becomes a problem when we dealing with things of God. No one can build a soul for you. You can get your knees and hips replaced, but there's no such thing as a faith replacement. You can sing the words of author's hymn, but the prayers to be lifted from within our hearts must be our own. Others can tell you what they believe, but their hope can't be loaned out. Faith and the life of following Jesus are intensely personal; no surrogates can stand in our place.

And so we come to the parable of the Good Samaritan, told as an answer to a question about achieving eternal life. It's a subversive and radical answer to that question Jesus gives, because the usual assumption was that working out the relationship between God and people was the responsibility of people like the priest and the Levite. They were in the salvation business. It was the reliable and faithful conducting of the ritual sacrifices, the routine uttering of prayers, and the observances of the many sacred days that kept God feeling favorable and benign toward humanity.

Yet, here was Jesus throwing that consensus on its collective ear by saying that the way to eternal life had to do with compassion instead of avoidance and the sacrifice of time and substance for the sake of another instead of sacrifice in the temple and sticking to the right schedule. In fact little is clearer in scripture than the intimate connection Jesus draws between loving God and loving neighbor as the way of understanding what God is all about. Eternal life is a matter of acting right, not believing right.

As William Temple put it, "It is a great mistake to think that God is chiefly interested in religion." As the first Letter of John puts it, "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their

brothers and sisters are liars.” There is no way of brokering those relationships, you see. No one can love God for you, no one can be a neighbor for you, and no one can do one and not do the other without negating the part that was done.

“Who is my neighbor?” The lawyer wanted Jesus to be his spiritual broker, his God expert, his answer man. He wanted love of God and love of neighbor to be made tidy and neat, with clear borders patrolled by rules. But, of course, loving God and neighbor is always a messy and imperfect process. We never do it perfectly. We grope our way to faithfulness. The lawyer wanted a rules manual, such as so many are quick to provide us. Do this and you’ll be saved, they say. He wanted something memorizable, something he have laminated in plastic and carry in his wallet. Instead, Jesus gave him a story.

The road from Jericho to Jerusalem is a little shorter than seventeen miles but falls in altitude over 3400 feet. The ancient historian Josephus spoke of the road in the first century as desolate and rocky. Jerome, writing in the fourth century, said the road was always infested with thieves and robbers. It was along this dangerous way, Jesus said, that an unidentified man was set upon, beaten, robbed, and left for the vultures and wolves. Two types of religious professionals come along but they don't stop to help. Why not? Well, maybe they were scared, maybe they thought the wounded man was playing possum, they had pressing schedules, they were running late for a funeral, or a Presbytery meeting, and they decided to find a phone and call a cop or an ambulance at the next gas station.

Or – and this may be the surest possibility – as religious professionals they would be considered defiled if they touched a dead man. If they were defiled, they would not be able to conduct the rituals which intercede to God on behalf of the people in worship at the Temple. Should they risk becoming unclean to save one man and leave the multitude without intercession? Well...that sounds a lot like another parable Jesus told about 99 sheep being left to fend for themselves while the shepherd searches for one which is lost. It sounds like killing the fatted calf to welcome home a prodigal son and leaving the faithful son to seethe. It sounds like going to the cross.

Jesus makes no explicit criticism of the priest and Levite, but it’s clear that for the sake of their finely wrought religious rituals a man could have died. How often that happens, that for the sake of some principle, for the sake of some prejudice, for the sake of some rigid understanding, we leave the wounded by the side of the road.

The lawyer asking the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" is another official of the religious establishment. He's an expert in the Mosaic law. Jesus' first response to his question, then, is to ask the man what his reading of the law says, and the lawyer quotes two passages – one from Deuteronomy 6:5, the other from Leviticus 19:18 –for his answer.

The lawyer should have stopped while he had it good. But, he didn't. The law says to love my neighbor. Fine. Now tell me, "Who is my neighbor?" Note, please, that Jesus never answers any of the man's questions. Rather, he keeps rephrasing the lawyer's questions and turning them back onto him. To the question about eternal life, he asks the man to do his own search of the scriptures. And to the “who is my neighbor” question, Jesus tells the lawyer a story and asks him to identify who acted like a neighbor. And what

an enormous difference there is in that, the difference between asking “who is my neighbor” and asking “how can I be a neighbor?”

How convenient it would be if we could live in a world where it was our right to define everyone else: you are good, so stand over here; you’re an imbecile, so go away; you might come in handy, so stand by; pretty ones here, ugly ones there, rich ones here, poor ones there.... In fact, we try to live that way. We make these discriminating judgments all the time. We love to define others. What we don’t do, however, is define ourselves, but that is what Jesus demands we do. The lawyer wants a handy definition of who his neighbor is so he can know whom to notice and whom to ignore. Jesus, however, won’t play that game. The issue, he says, is not who is your neighbor. The issue is who are you? The task is not to identify your neighbor; the task is to act like one.

What we want to dole out economically is what burst forth from Jesus with irresistible force! Like the teacher of the law, we tend to think that goodness is somehow expressed in rules. But dogma and rules never made anyone good. Christian love is never theoretical. It is always found in the quality of being a neighbor. That the men who passed the wounded man by were clergy suggests that what will save the world is not right doctrine but right practice, and that what saves each of us is not being attached to good organizations or rubbing shoulders with socially acceptable people, but acting out the severe requirements of grace, kindness, and compassion.

What a great weight this story places on the soul. We who consider ourselves neighborly may be those least able to imagine what being a neighbor is like. We who are very well-intentioned and like to consider ourselves generous and kind are the least likely to be traveling the Jericho roads of our day and least likely to even encounter the wounded at the side of that dangerous road. We travel manicured streets in a civil city. We inhabit territories the privileges of our class and station assure us. The poor, the outcast, the marginal walk other routes, by other means. If they stray too close we get nervous. And so, if we ask who is my neighbor, we find that they are those who have been socially profiled and found acceptable. But, if we ask how can we become a neighbor...now that changes the whole issue. Now it’s not a matter of choosing who’s in and who’s out, it’s become a matter of saying, as a follower of Christ, “I’m in. How can I help heal?”

The teaching of Jesus is that communities which depend upon distinctions and divisions that broker acceptability and assistance and health and happiness and spiritual fulfillment and community ignore and ultimately defeat what they pretend to be accomplishing. What secures eternal life, a metaphor for God's abundant graciousness and peace flowing unhampered and free, are not our schemes of protection, nor our good intentions, nor our right thinking, nor our social connections, nor our status as man or woman, nor our wisdom, our education, our exemplary moral righteousness, our right prayers, or our pocketbooks. What secures eternal life is loving God and loving God's people. All else is subterfuge.