

Today we're beginning our second, four-week summer series on questions that Jesus asks. We're starting today with the last question Jesus asks a lawyer in a parable in the Gospel of Luke. Before we turn to God's word I want to do two things: 1. Ask you to use your imagination and 2. Talk about the context, as we always do. Imagine a perceived enemy of yours. Who is this enemy? Is it a person or a group of people? Be honest with yourself and with God. "Who is the last person on earth you'd ever want to deem a 'good person?' Or be stuck in a broken-down elevator with for hours on end? Who is the last person you'd ask to save your life? Whom do you secretly hope to convert, fix, impress, control, or save- but never, ever need" (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net)? Name to yourself this enemy. Hold on to your answer as we talk about the context for today's very popular parable of the Good Samaritan. The temptation and challenge, especially on parables that are like old friends to us, are that we think we know what they're about and are no longer caught in the mystery of them. In other words, we are no longer surprised by them. However, AJ Levine, a retired Jewish NT scholar at Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville, TN, writes that reducing parables to a single meaning destroys their aesthetic as well as ethical potential. The same parable can leave multiple impressions over time- thanks to the work of the Holy Spirit among us. Parables aren't children's stories. No, they're designed to provoke, to challenge the listener's assumptions through vivid and often unexpected storytelling (Jennifer S. Wyant, workingpreacher.org). Jesus used parables to invite others to see what God is doing in the world from a new perspective. Through them, Jesus could make really bold claims that revealed truth

for those who had ears to hear. Parables can be subversive and dangerous. Levine says, "Religion has been defined as designed to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. We do well to think of the parables of Jesus as doing the afflicting. If we stop with the easy lessons, good though they may be, we lose the way Jesus' first followers would have heard the parables, and we lose the genius of Jesus' teaching. We might be better off thinking less about what they 'mean' and more about what they can 'do': remind, provoke, refine, confront, disturb..." (*Short Stories by Jesus*, pp. 3-4). Perhaps the Spirit will help us to recapture some of that sharpness so that we might be challenged to hear a new truth about the kingdom of God?! This much-loved parable is by no means simple. One scholar writes, "There is no other parable in the Jesus tradition that carries a comparable punch" (Robert Funk, Duke). "Just prior to the lawyer's appearance, Jesus has spoken of the great reversal- outsiders turned to insiders and vice versa. Hearing the exuberant report of the seventy, just returned from their mission, he thanks God: 'because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants'" (10:21). Perhaps this is why Luke places a lawyer at the beginning of today's story?! This was a legal expert- an expert in the Torah, the Jewish Law. This person more than likely represents 'the wise and intelligent.' Location also matters. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho had quite the negative reputation. It was a wild and scary road with lots of switchbacks- a hilly and often dangerous 18 miles' stretch of road. Two more things to make note of before we read today's parable: 1) The Traveler- the one beat up- is unknown to us. We know absolutely nothing about this person- no

status is given though many scholars assume he was a Jew due to Jesus' audience at the time being Jewish. 2) Jews and Samaritans have had over a thousand-year history of disdain for one another. Yes, the "enmity between the Jews and the Samaritans was ancient, entrenched, and bitter. The two groups disagreed about everything that mattered: how to honor God, how to interpret the Scriptures, and how and where to worship. They practiced 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" (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net). Remember John's story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well? She asks Jesus, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria" (4:9)? Or right before today's parable in Luke when a Samaritan village rejected Jesus, and James and John wanted revenge: 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them' (9:54)? You get the point. Let us pray. **PRAY. As you listen to God's word**, remember, when we turn to Jesus' parables, we do well to hear them as the people in the first century first heard them. **READ Luke 10:25-37.**

As a preacher's kid, I knew that the answer to most children's sermons was Jesus. I also knew the parable of the Good Samaritan and was taught to follow Jesus' lesson here to be charitable and kind like the Good Samaritan. Go and do what he did. That's all good but I always wondered if there was more and why a Samaritan? I didn't hear this parable as a challenge or an affliction. According to Jewish NT Scholar AJ Levine, if we hear a parable and we think, 'isn't that nice and lovely?'

then we aren't hearing it through the ears of the first century Jews. What would Jesus' original audience have made of this parable? Would they have agreed with it? Again, parables are meant to provoke. "Surely there is nothing wrong with interpreting the Good Samaritan parable as a 'go and do likewise' story. After all, we are called to be imitators of Christ. The Good Samaritan offers a beautiful example to follow, and we would do well to pay attention" (Thomas). After all, we've named hospitals, civic organizations, nursing homes, non-profits, etc. after the "Samaritan." We even have a Good Samaritan law that legally protects people who stop to help a stranger in need. But is this really all? Or did Jesus have something more provocative in mind (Thomas)?

Perhaps we should take another look at the larger story surrounding the parable. A lawyer approaches Jesus asking, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Most scholars believe him to be testing Jesus with this question, as it isn't answerable because one cannot do anything to earn eternal life. It is a gift from God. I have to say that I appreciate his bold question. And in true Jesus fashion, Jesus doesn't answer the question directly. He turns it back on his would-be-student: "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" The lawyer gives an A+ answer. "Love God with everything you got and love your neighbor as yourself." Of course this is taken directly from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. Jesus acknowledges that this guy could've been a preacher's kid knowing the right answer and encourages him to do the next step- "Do this, and you will live." But the lawyer, not satisfied and wanting to justify himself, asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor? (v. 29)" Many scholars believe that

what the lawyer is really asking is “Who is NOT my neighbor?” How much love are we talking here, Jesus? Can you be more specific? I mean, there are lines, aren’t there? It seems he asked the wrong question. The question could have been, “How do I love my neighbor?” The lawyer doesn’t want to know that. He wants to justify himself in case what he is challenged to do is beyond his capacity. Of course Jesus doesn’t take the bait and tells this parable.

“The priest or Levite didn’t pass by the wounded man because they were clerics or because they were obsessive about purity. No, they avoided the wounded man probably for the most human of reasons: they know the commandments, but regardless, when the chips are down, it’s just easier and safer not to get involved” (*Proclaiming the Parables*, Tom Long). It’s like Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King said in Memphis at the Sanitation Workers’ Strike in what became his final sermon, “I imagine the first question the priest and the Levite asked was: ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ But by the very nature of his concern, the good Samaritan reversed this question, ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’” So why then did Jesus bring the priest and Levite up? Perhaps because “the duo anticipate, in good folkloric fashion, the appearance of a third figure” (Levine). There is this thing called the rule of three. Let’s try it . Father, Son, and ? Larry, Moe, and ? Among Jesus’ Jewish audience the third of the group was obvious: an Israelite. Surprised that the first two didn’t follow the law and show compassion, they were ready to hear about the Israelite hero who helped the beaten man. A priest, a Levite and an

Israelite were walking on the Jericho road; it sounds like the beginnings of a good joke. But that is NOT what Jesus said because Jesus is telling a parable and parables never go the way one expects. Jesus told of the hero being a Samaritan, a staunch enemy to the Jews. Think back to who you thought of as your enemy. There was no “good” regarding Samaritans at least not in a Jewish person’s mind. Notice that Jesus doesn’t call the Samaritan “good.” That is an adjective that has been adopted along the way. After telling the parable, Jesus asks the lawyer, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers” (v. 36)? Notice that the lawyer cannot even say the name “Samaritan.” He answers, “The one who showed him mercy.” The Samaritan does not simply tolerate his Jewish neighbor; he loves him actively and abundantly, despite their hostility (Wyant). In this parable, “Jesus was saying your neighbor- your enemy- is the one who scandalizes you with compassion. Your neighbor- your enemy- is the one who upends all your entrenched categories and shocks you with a fresh face of God. Jesus was asking them to dream of a different kind of kingdom. He was asking them to leave room God’s world-altering surprises” (Thomas). Yes, and even more so- “the true revolutionary power of this story swings into view only when we realize that the appearance of the merciful Samaritan on the Jericho road is not simply the arrival of another traveler, a despised enemy, or even a good example. It is, rather, the arrival of another world, an unexpected and life-changing reality in which mercy overcomes alienation. Two parallel lines have met in eternity, and what comes down the Jericho road is not merely a Samaritan but the surprise of God’s kingdom, eternal life itself

drawn near in the form of an enemy-turned-neighbor whose compassion and action are considered humanly impossible” (Long).

I wonder what the lawyer thought after his own response. Perhaps he thought, “‘Yeah, right Jesus, no way is *that* going to happen in the real world,’ or if his eyes suddenly see what ‘prophets and kings desired to see’- ‘The world is not what I imagined, and now everything must be rethought, everything” (Long). “For the lawyer, and for Luke’s readers, the Samaritan does what God does. The divine is manifested only through our actions” (Levine). Is it better to acknowledge the humanity and the potential to do good in the enemy, rather than to choose death? As followers of Christ, will we care for our enemies, who are also our neighbors? Will we be able to bind their wounds rather than blow up their cities and citizens? And can we imagine that they might do the same for us (Levine)? Jesus tells us we must. Afflicted yet? Jesus’ last question in this parable sets the tone for what is to be expected in the kingdom of God. Are we able to hear this new truth of God’s kingdom here on earth? Jesus says, “Do this and you will live.” Thanks be to God! Amen!