

In Defense of the Priest and the Levite

This is a parable for today.

It should be obvious to us that the responses to the body on the side of the road by the priest and the Levite were motivated by *fear*.

The heart of the gospel is that perfect love casts *out* fear.

But fear divides us up, doesn't it? And when the world is divided into "like" and "not like," nothing good is going to come of it. That is what makes this a parable for today. And the tough love for us today is that we can't engage with the Gospel and think that it has nothing to say to us about the world in which we live, right now.

This story has a great moral force to it, and it satisfies our need to have something we can *do* when all the dust settles. There is good, there is bad, and it's clear.

Or is it?

There *is* a defense for them. They are basically a preacher and an elder in the temple system. Their jobs required they maintain *ritual purity*. If the body on the side of the road was dead, they lost their purity, and they couldn't do their jobs. Regaining ritual purity isn't like scrubbing in for surgery. It took weeks of seclusion and various rites to regain purity, and in the meantime, nobody could worship God, because *they* couldn't do their jobs. In short, it could represent a certain dereliction of duty, even selfishness, to step outside of their roles – their duty - as leaders in the temple by stopping. Perhaps the Priest and the Levite aren't so indefensible after all. That's the rationale.

For years we have downplayed the significance of the Samaritan's actions by focusing on what poor examples of humanity the priest and the Levite represented, but for all we know, they were good people.

Have you ever wondered why we call the story the Parable of the Good Samaritan? Nowhere in the body of the text does Jesus call the man a *good* Samaritan. It's just Samaritan. "Good" is applied after the fact by the editors, not by Jesus. It's a qualifier, so that we know that this isn't just any Samaritan, but a *good* one; not to be confused with all those *other* Samaritans, the "not so good" Samaritans. Jesus makes no such distinction.

During the Babylonian captivity, some folks were left behind, they stayed home and interacted with their captors whether by choice or by force... they literally "slept with the enemy." They are the Samaritans. They had opposed the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple and consequently had constructed their own temple on Mount Gerazim, and completely rejected the authority of the Jerusalem temple. In other words, they had taken the Jewish religion, and in the

view of good Jews, had twisted it for their own purposes. A Jew would have walked around the entire region of Samaria sooner than step one foot in it, because “those people” were there. Now that’s the Jewish view.

From the Samaritan point of view, they *had* to start their own temple because the Jews were never going to let them be a part of the Jerusalem temple in any meaningful way. They were *still* treating them as collaborators though it had been centuries since the captives came home. They would be excluded from leadership because of popular prejudice against them as heretics. From the Samaritan point of view, the Jews of the first century were completely unwilling to be confused by the facts and willfully ignored the reality that within fifty years of the Assyrian conquest, the people who had left were back and a part of the life of the community. It is from the group who stayed home that the Samaritans are descended.

Having said all that, perhaps it makes a little more sense when I say these two groups of people didn’t have much use for each other.

The Samaritan was already a heretic, therefore already ritually impure; I suppose one could rationalize that there really wasn’t a reason for him *not* to stop. When you look at it from a certain point of view, him stopping isn’t really that big a deal.

Except that it really is. Being impressed with someone else’s goodness is no excuse for not exhibiting our own. That’s the problem with trying to mount a defense for the priest and the Levite. We don’t know the first thing about them other than what they didn’t do. What they did was not much of anything. And that seems to be the problem.

That is also what makes what the Samaritan did do extraordinarily good.

That is really Jesus’ point in the end. He could have told this story to the lawyer using any number of participants, but he chose a Samaritan. He chose to highlight what would surely have looked like a paradox: A heretic doing what a priest failed to do... it’s the ultimate reversal isn’t it? It’s like an atheist doing what the Christians failed to do. Jesus’ point isn’t so much that the priest and the Levite didn’t do anything as it is that the Samaritan did. There’s a moral lesson, to be sure, and it has to do with God’s expectations of us.

The Gospel has expectations of us. When Jesus is talking with this lawyer, it is clear that he is not just telling the story to make someone feel good, he expects change.

You know that there is not a thing in the world we can do to make God love us more or less than God already does. But we ignore to our moral peril the parallel fact that God *absolutely* does have expectations of us.

I confess to a profound discomfort with this text, because once I have put it out there that God has expectations of us – expectations that we are intervening for mercy in the world; I have no idea what you’re going to do with that challenge. Now, this concern arises out of real-life experience. When I was a new minister, not but 26 or 27, I happened on a conversation between

two elderly members of my church during coffee hour. They were planning a trip to Raleigh to get arrested at the state capitol building in protest of some moral injustice. So, I'm looking at them, and George is walking with a cane, and Joyce was a little dotty already, and all I could think is, "This is what happens when you shoot off your mouth about the Gospel and people actually listen." That's probably a glorified view of my own role in their faith lives, but the point is, they *listened* to the Gospel.

This is a parable for today because we hear a lot about the fracturing of *community*, and how easy it is to see the other as well, *other*. We hear about the ways that income inequality and political polarization claw at the fabric of the community that binds us together and the humanity that God demands from us. It makes me all the more cognizant and grateful that this congregation is a place of intentional inclusivity...

But this parable says God wants even more from us.

When Christians are at our best, we are living the kingdom of God. Our lives are physical manifestations of God's presence and God's way on earth.

When Jesus turned the lawyer's question back to him, the lawyer answered correctly with an old creed of Judaism, "We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind, and love our neighbors as ourselves." He understood that much.

What he wanted from Jesus was an answer as to *just how much that demanded from him*. "Who, after all, is our neighbor?"

Just how big, after all, are God's expectations of us?

The Hebrew Law of Leviticus already answered that question and the lawyer knew it. But he wanted clarification. But when Jesus answers, he does *not* clarify the law, as requested. Instead, he *expands* it. He tells the young lawyer *how* to be a neighbor. And then he says, "Go and do likewise."

We can't love God without loving our neighbor. It's that simple.

That's why I any defense I mount for the priest and the Levite are going to run up dry - not because they were necessarily bad people, but because God wants more from us.

I love that MANNA was founded right here in our kitchen, out of a response to the AIDS crisis. When I was in Atlanta, there was a story that was practically legend about a young man in the hospital in his early twenties dying of AIDS. He was not in a church, but some of the family had some recollection of a church connection. As he was approaching death, they called a church and a minister went to the hospital and stood out in the hall opposite the room and yelled in a prayer. And another minister heard about it and she rushed to the hospital and she went in the room and she went over to the bed and sat in a chair by the bed, and cradled that young man's head in her arm. She sang, she read scripture and she prayed until he died. And her colleagues

asked, “But weren’t you afraid?” (This was when we didn’t know much about HIV.) And she said, “Yes, I went home and bathed and prayed...”

“Well why did you do that?” they all wanted to know.

She said, “If they called Jesus to the hospital, what would he do?”¹

I think we know the answer to that question. Like I said, I love that MANNA was founded here for the same reasons.

But what are we going to do next? What is Jesus calling us to do next?

The reason this is a parable for today isn’t that what the priest and the Levite did doesn’t make sense. *The problem is that it makes too much sense.* And it is too easy to fall in line with what they did. That’s important to note.

But do you want to know the real point?

This isn’t really a parable about what we are supposed to do.

It’s a parable about what we’re supposed to *be*.

We don’t need to learn to be like that Samaritan just so we can check off God’s expectations. There’s no grace in doing that. If being Christian becomes for us about fulfilling expectations, then it’s not any different from the Lawyer’s question about what he must do to inherit eternal life. The calling to Christian life is the calling to a changed life. It means we learn how to see the world without seeing Jews or Samaritans. We learn to see *need* without seeing *danger*. When I think of what the will of Jesus Christ is for this place, for The First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, the mother of American Presbyterianism, it doesn’t get any simpler than the command to love God and love our neighbors... deeply, intentionally, meaningfully, and perhaps most importantly *tangibly*.

Of course, there’s always an alternative to that. We can always see the world as a stingy, mean, dangerous, and foreign place.

I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to live that way.

The good news of the Gospel – the *expectation* of the Gospel, is that we won’t.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

¹ Fred Craddock, Craddock Stories.