

THE VIEW FROM THE DITCH
Thoughts on the Good Samaritan
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(Holding up a gold box) I wonder what this is. It looks like a present. I think it is a type of present. Let's see what is inside? (Pulling items out) Well, now what is this and what about these. I'm not sure but I know now that this is a parable box. In Godly Play our parables come in gold boxes, because they are presents. We have to open them, explore them, play with them to know what they are.

They are stories told to make a point, but we have to decide what the point is for us. Some are easier to figure out than others.

We start out with a question that is asked of Jesus in all three of the synoptic gospels. What must I do to attain eternal life or enter the kingdom or what is the greatest commandment? These are all variations on a theme. In all cases either Jesus or in this case the lawyer quotes part of Deuteronomy 6 a passage known as the Shema. This prayer, which begins with "Here O Israel" and goes on with the words we heard today from the Gospel. Faithful Jews every morning and every evening say this prayer. It is both the first and the last words on their lips everyday. It is then combined with the command to love your neighbor from Leviticus 19 verse 18.

Jesus replies, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." Now if the lawyer had stopped here, this would have been a very short sermon, but the lawyer is not satisfied and wants to justify himself. What does the Bible mean here when it says he wanted to justify himself.

The lawyer is seeking to prove himself, to prove he is righteous; that he knows what the law commands. He wants to prove that he knows what to do and wants Jesus to help him prove it. In some respects it reminds me of the student who wants to know exactly how many words or pages do I need to write and what do I need to say to get an A. Once again Jesus does not give him a straight answer, but launches into the parable itself, a parable that expands the circle of who is a neighbor.

There are some important aspects of the parable itself, which demand our attention. The man is traveling from Jerusalem, down to Jericho. This is a perilous trip of about 13 miles with a steep drop of 3500 feet in elevation. It was known as a favorite hangout of robbers and thieves with multiple places for an ambush. People did not decide to make this trip lightly, there had to be an important reason for him to make the trip especially alone.

Then there is the importance of the words “a certain man” that Luke uses. It is entirely likely that the audience would assume that the man who was beaten is Jewish. Yet the text does not say that, he is just a man. He could be anyone, Jew, Samaritan or Roman. So already Jesus has widened the circle.

A popular misconception in this parable is that Jesus is opening up the definition of neighbor. Jesus is not broadening the definition of a neighbor. The lawyer should have known that in that same chapter of Leviticus in verse 34 the definition of a neighbor has already been provided when it says, “love aliens in your land as yourself, for you were once aliens in Egypt.” Like that professor Jesus is making the lawyer and us by extension think about what the Bible says.

It might be easy as some commentaries mention to excuse the priest and to some extent the Levite from the responsibility to aide the injured man. A priest who touched a dead body was ritually unclean and could not perform his duties at the temple for seven days. We might say that he would have thought, “Oh my he is badly hurt and might even be dead, but I have my duty to God and I must not stop.” The same could be said for the Levite, but please note that both of them are going “down to Jericho.” They are not on their way to the temple, they are leaving town. Their duties for the week must have been over!

Then the Samaritan appears on the scene. This is an even more shocking turn of events. In the pattern of three’s used in many parables. Jesus has a priest, a Levite and then we would expect a Jewish layperson, but Jesus instead chooses a Samaritan. It is important to look at the role of the Samaritan in this parable. Jesus has just traveled through a portion of the world that was populated by Samaritans and most if not all of them had rejected his teachings and sent Jesus and the disciples packing! This is shown just a chapter earlier in Luke 9:53. I decided to look up what a Samaritan was and found that I could not get a straight answer. Several sources said that they were a sect of Judaism with a temple in a different location and others said they were the left over from the Babylonian captivity and were a result of intermarriage during that time. Wherever they came from they were intensely disliked by mainstream members of Judaism as well as much of the Gentile population. So Jesus selects one of the most disliked groups of people to set up as the one who has compassion and should be an example to all. This would be shocking not only to Jewish listeners and the disciples, but to the Gentile readers of Luke as well.

Now there is one aspect here that we have not yet really examined, the view from the ditch. I wonder what it would be like to watch as the priest and the Levite walk by. These are people he would trust even if he was not Jewish. Then a total stranger, maybe another thief ready to finish him off walks up and rescues him.

This reminds me of a story that happened to a Roman Catholic priest in Cleveland. Fr. Bob is the rector of a very interesting inner-city parish in Cleveland. Homelessness is a huge problem around him and he was having a particular

problem with one man. The man insisted on living in the front entrance of the church and using a corner of it as his bathroom. Bob reasoned with the man, tried to help him, but ultimately had to call the police and have him arrested.

A few days later Fr. Bob was rollerblading down the street and took a horrendous fall. Now he was not wearing a collar, didn't have a cell phone and had badly sprained his ankle. Nobody stopped to help until he heard a voice. "Hi Fr. Bob, you ok?" He looked up and thought, oh no anybody but this guy. God, I know I need help but did you have to send this guy. Of course it was the homeless man who came to his rescue and helped him get back to the rectory. Sometimes being a neighbor means accepting help from where we do not expect it or may not even want it. Graciously accepting help from someone allows them to be in the role of the compassionate Samaritan. Sometimes we are called to receive the gift rather than give it.

Jesus has turned the tables on the lawyer. In the final verses he then asks, who "turned out to be the neighbor." We are not talking about legal obligation at this point, but instead about gift giving. The emphasis is not on the man in the ditch and who we should treat as a neighbor, but on all of us who are challenged to act as neighbors to all around us. The spotlight is turned not on the man in the ditch, but on our own lives and our own response to those in need and how we respond when we are in need.

All of this is summed up in the last verse of the passage. "Go and do likewise." Do this! Mere appearances don't work. We are called to action. The only other time Jesus says "Do this" in a similar manner is at the last supper when he institutes the sacrament of Holy Communion. Just as with Communion, we don't just sit back and watch we are called to get up, come forward take action. This is what Jesus is telling us here as well.

Law is transformed into gospel. We are called to take the same risks and go the extra distance as the Samaritan. This is what the love of Christ commands us to do. This love is a call to action that we are asked to live out in our daily life.

Love God, Love neighbor. Do this, no exceptions, no limitations, no excuses.