

**Getting Low and Rising Up**  
**Psalm 82**  
**Luke 10:25-37**  
**July 10, 2016**  
**Fort Hill Presbyterian Church**

Questions! Questions! Everybody has questions! We live in a world that has had its core shaken for some time now and this week has been full of such moments. Nations and regions are unsettled or occupied. *When will ISIS be controlled?* Cities are on high alert as populations of people are targeted with bombs. *Where will LGBTQ persons feel safe now?* Citizens who thought they could trust authority have had their own lives placed in question. What happened to protecting the people? What happened to respecting those who wear uniforms? When will the killing stop?

Jesus had his share of questions too. What I like about Jesus when he is questioned is his ability to remain cool. He practices and even perfects that Socratic (or rabbinic) method of teaching with questions. In Mark's and Matthew's gospels Jesus is peppered with questions from the Sadducees and Pharisees, religious leaders challenging his authority, as he goes about sharing the good news with all people. He is asked about paying taxes and marriage in the resurrection by those who don't even believe in the resurrection!

Brian Blount, President of Union Presbyterian Seminary and a New Testament scholar says that whenever Jesus is called *Rabbi* in the scriptures it always precedes trouble for him. In Luke, the use of Rabbi instead of Lord would have been an affront to Jesus, letting him know that those asking him questions did not respect him as Lord. In Matthew and Mark he's then asked about the greatest commandment. But in Luke the question is different. A lawyer poses a rather odd question about eternal life. "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus was clever because he knew this was a trick question for one does not have to "do" anything to "inherit." Inheritance is not earned; it is a gift. Even a lawyer should know this, but Jesus returns the question with a question, "What is written in the Torah?" And he even adds a second question asking the lawyer to interpret the law, not merely state it, "What does it read?" The lawyer responds with the great commandments of Loving God and Loving Neighbor. And so he is correct. He knows the law. Jesus tells him to "Do this and you will live."

But it's not enough for the lawyer. He is preoccupied with himself and wanting self-justification. "Who is my neighbor?" Now here *is* a potential legal question, for there were laws governing treatment of residents and those who lived within the boundaries. "Who am I bound to call my neighbor according to the law?" Some scholars say that what the lawyer was really implying by his question to Jesus was "Who is not my neighbor?" "Legally, who can I exclude?" But Jesus goes further in teaching the law by sharing a parable.

Now we need to hear this story as a Jew would hear it and thanks to Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish New Testament Professor at Vanderbilt, we are able to hear it and learn more about what

Jesus' intent was in the telling. In parables there is a recurrence of threes and this parable has three passersby. In familiar stories to the Jewish ear usually a story with a "priest and a Levite" is going to have an Israelite as the third, but Jesus messes with his listeners and says "a Samaritan" and not just any Samaritan, but a "good" one! Samaritans were the epitome of the enemy for Jews. They were not strangers but knew one another so well they despised each other. The use of a "good Samaritan" would have been insulting to the Jews who heard the story.

Levine describes Samaritans "less as oppressed but benevolent figures and more as the enemy." She says that Jewish listeners might have thought, "I'd rather die than acknowledge that one from that group saved me"; "I do not want to acknowledge that a rapist has a human face"; or "I do not want to recognize that a murderer will be the one to rescue me."<sup>i</sup>

Additionally, the Jewish listeners would have known the meaning of "neighbor" as referenced in the Torah. In Genesis a neighbor is a "fellow" or the "other guy"<sup>ii</sup> and in Exodus a neighbor can describe the "intimate relationship between God and Moses" as they were face to face speaking as friends.<sup>iii</sup> This puts the lawyer in an uncomfortable position then when the good Samaritan is viewed as a neighbor. While he posed his question as a legal one, Jesus responded to it within the context of love. And to take it even a step further in Leviticus 19 we learn about those who are not geographic residents, but aliens in the midst. "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."<sup>iv</sup> (v. 33-34)

Is it not amazing how this parable has meaning even today on so many levels? Love is the overarching power.

Maybe for us we can hear this sense of repugnance with Clarence Jordan's translation of the *Cotton Patch Version of Luke & Acts*. "He uses the race relations in the Jim Crow South as a method to freshen up the story:

*A man was headed to Atlanta from Albany and was robbed by gangsters. A white preacher came by...and stepped on the gas...a white Gospel song leader came by...and stepped on the gas...a black man came and was moved to tears by what he saw. He took the man-a white man! -to the hospital, emptied his pockets and promised to pay any outstanding bill. Which one of these is our neighbor? And the man replies, "Why, of course, the nig- I mean er...well, er...the one who treated me kindly.*

Or maybe we hear this account as familiar today:

"An Israeli Jewish man is robbed and beaten and left for dead, and a Good Hamas member saves his life.

A liberal Democrat is robbed and beaten and left for dead, and a Good conservative Republican saves her life.

A white supremacist is robbed and beaten and left for dead, and a Good black teenager saves his life.

A transgender woman is robbed and beaten and left for dead, and a Good anti-LGBTQ activist saves her life.

An atheist is robbed and beaten and left for dead, and a Good Christian fundamentalist saves his life.”

Jesus is the only voice in his time who said, “Love your enemies.” Even today we are much more comfortable with thinking of the good Samaritan as helping a *stranger* instead of having to face our *enemies* so closely. This sense of helping the stranger which is beyond the message Jesus was sending has led to hundreds of hospitals and medical care centers as well as each state and many countries having a “Good Samaritan” law. There is an old Arab proverb that says, “To have a good neighbor, you must be one.”

Children have always enjoyed acting out the Good Samaritan story. They love to play the part of the Samaritan and some like to play the part of the robbers. But something happens when children take turns as the victim. They change. They are not as familiar with this quiet role of being almost dead, lifeless. They know how to help and how to hurt, but how to suffer is foreign to them. And I think that is as it should be.

In looking at paintings of this parable, I have been impressed by the following two.

In Vincent VanGogh’s painting of the Good Samaritan in 1890, the Samaritan is lifting the man up onto his donkey. There is intimate struggle between the two as they are face to face and the position is awkwardly painful for the wounded man. The Samaritan is strong with muscles in his legs and arms showing his capacity to care for the man. The Samaritan is well dressed and has shoes and a headpiece. The wounded man is wrapped in a cloth around his waist and a bandage around his head. He is pale and faint compared to the Samaritan who is ruddy. VanGogh’s style of painting gives the whole view tension and you can see an empty box beside the road either where the man’s possessions were stolen or perhaps from the Samaritan’s items used to care for the man. Down the road we can see the back of the Levite and the priest on further in the distance, barely recognizable.

In contrast Aime Morot’s painting in 1880 looks almost like a photograph of two men side by side. One, the wounded man, is perched naked on the donkey and slumped over the back of the Samaritan who walks alongside the donkey propping up the man. Both are barefooted. The Samaritan does not appear as strong and is not well-dressed, in only a waist cloth. His eyes are set forward in determination as his left hand braces the chest of his almost dead companion and his right hand supports the man’s back. The wounded man’s position is reminiscent of the Christ’s body in Rubens’ “Descent from the Cross.” The road appears rocky and inclined. The

donkey is small, and heavy laden with two large packs and the wounded man whose body is pale and lifeless.

Both paintings present the reality that mercy requires being close and getting down on the same level as the one in need. There is also raising up that takes place, lifting up of the Other. Both artists appropriately present the wounded man without description of class, religion, or race. He is representative of every other human being while the passersby represent different classes and groups.

Psalms 82 gives us insight into how God feels about neglecting the poor and vulnerable. Throughout the Old Testament when God is present with the council, it is usually with the Israelites sitting in judgment.<sup>vi</sup> Council of the gods was put on trial for not giving justice to the weak and the orphan, for not maintaining the right of the lowly and destitute, for not rescuing the weak and the needy, for not delivering them from the hand of the powerful who are evil.

In the Psalm the divine council is implicated meaning the Israelites have failed in their execution of justice, and so the divine council is closed and the children of the gods will die as the mortals and princes, and God's sovereignty will be evident. Just as Jesus was giving the lawyer the big picture about loving neighbor so too does the psalmist imply the responsibility to have God's providential love for the poor, the widow and the orphan is the most basic way to show that love.

The Samaritan saw the need and acted upon it. He was moved when he saw one in need and so he had compassion, he felt it in his gut to go and help, to go even further and see to the man's welfare so that the man could live. The Samaritan extended mercy, lovingkindness, *hesed*, God's justice. Mercy then is intimate and personal, it is on a small scale where lives are transformed and life is preserved. This is Torah living, living out the instruction that has been taught in the law. Thus the law is born of mercy.

Justice is born out of mercy, making the world better for the other one. In Morgan Guyton's new book *How Jesus Saves the World From Us—12 Antidotes to Toxic Christianity*, he says,

Mercy can save us from the hardness of our hearts only when our carefully managed boundaries get violated by the other. ... But mercy is messy. It's mercy only if your heart has been wounded enough by the other person's suffering to fog up your moral clarity and shatter your confidence that you have an easy solution to the other person's problems. Thomas Merton points out that genuine mercy brings us so close to others that we can no longer tell who is the recipient of the mercy: "If my compassion is true, if it be a deep compassion of the heart and not a legal affair, or a mercy learned from a book and practiced on others like a pious exercise, then my compassion for others is God's mercy for me. My patience with them is His patience with me. My love for them is His love for me."<sup>vii</sup>

We can take advice from Dr. Martin Luther King about what to do in our present day crisis regarding violence.

In examining the parable Dr. King said he thought that the reason the priest and the Levite did not stop to help the man was that they were afraid. They asked themselves the question: “If I stop to help this man what will happen to me?” That is a fear based question.

Instead he said we need to be asking ourselves the question that the Samaritan asked, “If I do not stop to help this man what will happen to him?”<sup>viii</sup> This is a mercy based question. It focuses on the well-being of the other and has love as its source.

Love God and love your neighbor—Go and do as the good Samaritan did, helping where there is need. Let us do justice, seek kindness and walk humbly with our God this day and in the days ahead.

---

<sup>i</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus-The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, (HarperCollins: New York, NY, 2014), 96.

<sup>ii</sup> Genesis 11:3.

<sup>iii</sup> Exodus 33:11.

<sup>iv</sup> Leviticus 19:33-34.

<sup>v</sup> Examples offered by Debie Thomas in “Go and Do Likewise,” *Journey with Jesus*, 2016. I have slightly adapted these with emphasis on the treatment of the victim.

<sup>vi</sup> Exodus 21:6 and 22:8. Israel also wanted a king instead of God as their ruler. Consider these verses in relationship to judgment and decisions about justice: Deuteronomy 1:15-18, 16:18-20; I Samuel 8:18-20; I Kings 22:19-23.

<sup>vii</sup> Morgan Guyton, *How Jesus Saves the World From Us-12 Antidotes to Toxic Christianity* (Westminster John Knox: Louisville, KY, 2016), 25.

<sup>viii</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “On Being a Good Neighbor” as found <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/being-good-neighbor-0>, accessed July 8, 2016.



