

“Knowing Right from Wrong”

Luke 10:25-37 (NRSV)

When we were young, many of us were probably taught “right” from “wrong” in very simple, straightforward ways:

- Share.
- Be kind.
- Don’t hit.
- Don’t tease or make fun of others.
- Care for creation. Or, as we I was taught “Don’t Mess with Texas.” (Most people don’t know the origin of that motto...it’s about state pride but not the kind of pride you think. It’s about caring for the highways and byways of Texas...it’s an anti-litter campaign from the late 80’s that’s still stuck to this day).

In any case, we are taught these fairly straightforward rules as kids. And then, we grow up.

And all the sudden these simple things that we *know* are “right” – become really hard to do. We rationalize away their “rightness” with nuances and justifications:

- Share. Okay, but: How much do I have to share? I’ll share some, but this is my hard earned money and I don’t want to share more than what others are sharing.
- Don’t hit. Okay, but: What about “self-defense?” What if they hit me first?
- Care for creation. Okay, but: I know we need to cut down on pollution, but I *need* my car for work. The bus is too inconvenient and the light rail doesn’t run where I need it to run. The hospitals and rehab centers I visit are all over Denver; I *need* my car.

So often, we think we know the “right” thing to do *in principal*. However, *in practice* – it’s a whole different ballgame. And so, we sometimes exempt ourselves from these simple rules because we convince ourselves that as adults we now understand all the complexities of life and really what is “right” and “wrong” is somewhat subjective, isn’t it? Especially on a systemic level...things get crazy complicated then.

The economics of sharing are fine and good when you are talking about a toy in a playroom with friends, but when you are talking about our national resources and how we use them to help our own citizens and people from other countries – well, that’s a different ballgame.

The rule to “not hit” is fine and good when you are talking about kids roughhousing on a playground, but what about when you are talking about our national security and how we protect ourselves and others. Isn’t violence combatting violence in the name of peace a worthy cause...even if not an ideal situation?

These are real things we grapple with. Individually these things are complicated. Systemically and societally, they are even *more* complicated. Especially when we all can’t agree on what the “right thing to do” is in any given situation. I’m not sure we’ll ever agree on what one “right” thing to do in a situation is to solve a major problem, but this is where today’s text gives me hope. Maybe we don’t have to agree on what the “right” or

“wrong” thing to do is in a given situation...maybe we don’t even have to agree on whose ballgame we’re playing in or if our team is going to win or lose. Maybe we just need to focus on the ball that’s flying at us in this moment and see if we can make contact with it in some way. Today’s parable confronts us with the reality of the present moment of stepping up to bat in the game we’re in, rather than standing on the sidelines wishing our world was playing in some other game where things were different.

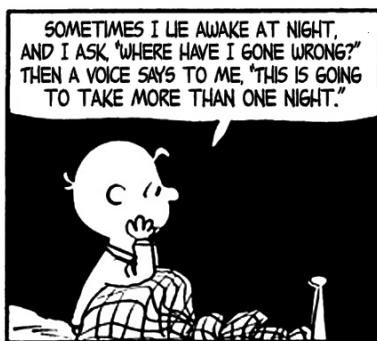
Today’s parable is a familiar one. We love it because it affirms what we believe about our faith – a variation of the golden rule – “*do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*” The Samaritan’s actions reveal the “better angels” of our human nature, even as other characters in the story reveal parts of our human nature that we’d rather to not own up to.

So many of Jesus’ parables are cryptic and hard to understand yet this one is pretty simple and straightforward. So why is something that is so clear and

straightforward in principal, so dang hard to live out in practice?

In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul writes directly about the inner conflict so many of us feel: *“Listen, I can’t explain my actions. Here’s why: I am not able to do the things I want; and at the same time, I do the things I despise,”* (Romans 7:15). This is the story of my life in so many ways – how about you?

Whenever I read this verse, it reminds me of another theologian, Charles Schultz, who had Charlie Brown muse in one of his comic strips once, *“Sometimes I lie awake at night and I ask, ‘Where have I gone wrong?’ then a voice says to me, ‘this is going to take more than one night.’”*



When we’re honest with ourselves, we let down the façade of always being the kind of person who does the right thing and has the right answers...and we realize...we are human...and we mess up and often don’t have the answers and we often don’t do the right thing. And – that’s okay. This parable often gets played out as an ethical lesson about who is a better person than someone else and it can be used to guilt trip people into doing the right thing. But Jesus isn’t into guilt. He’s into transformation. So let’s look again at this parable to see what we can glean that won’t make us feel guilty about our bad behavior, but rather will inspire us to behave in the best and most loving ways we can.

Being a pastor, it’s easy for me to imagine myself as the priest or the Levite, preoccupied with the duties I have just come from and thinking about the meeting or hospital visit or worship service that is ahead. All that I have to do to prepare. All the people that are waiting on me and who expect me to be prepared. I am one person – I can’t meet everybody’s needs. I think we can all easily see

ourselves as the priest or the Levite. We all have things to do, places to go, worthy causes to attend to. Jesus doesn't give a rationale or explanation for why these first two men "cross to the other side and pass by" but through the years we have created reasons for them. To touch a bleeding man would make the priest and the Levite ritually unclean, unable to perform their Temple duties. (Never mind that the text says they were traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, implying that their Temple worship duties were over in Jerusalem.) Even still, they are busy helping so many other people. And maybe they were just plum tired and exhausted and had hit their people-limit for the day. I know for sure that introverts have a "people-limit" (and I'm guessing extroverts do too). Maybe their kids first soccer game was starting in 20 minutes and they really wanted to be there. Who would fault them for wanting to spend time with their family? There are so many good reasons for why they would have passed by.

And through the years as we've told and interpreted this parable, we've come up with

these reasons for why the priest and the Levite might have passed the man by because we don't want to imagine (and certainly it can't be true) that the priest and the Levite just didn't care. That they just didn't have a heart when they saw this man. We can't let ourselves believe that because it's too awful. And if that could be true for them, what about us? No, we have to believe that they *do* care, they just couldn't physically show care in that moment because they were caring for other people or because they chose not to care in that moment). It's too painful a reality to imagine they really just walked by and didn't help because they didn't want. Surely they had a good reason.

We sure do a lot interpretatively, to justify their behavior, don't we? But I actually don't believe Jesus told this parable to make do intellectual somersaults in an attempt to justify the actions of the priest and the Levite. Jesus doesn't dwell on their actions at all. The actions he dwells on are those of the Samaritan. These actions are so important that Jesus lists them and names them one by one: he saw the

man, he went toward the man, he bandaged his wounds, he poured oil on his wounds, he put him on his animal, he took him to an inn, he stayed with him to care for him, he gave money to provide for his future needs. Jesus wants us to see and know the deeds, the actions, of the Samaritan man, who, by the way, might have also had very important things to do that day...who probably also had a family to get home to, a job to get to, plans for his day – just like the priest and the Levite. We tend to make excuses for the priest and Levite because of their elite and powerful positions in the socio-economic hierarchy of the day...however that is unfair to the Samaritan. We don't know his job or profession or family. We can assume, though, that wherever he was headed that day on the road, was just as important and just as time-sensitive, and just as pressing as whatever the priest and the Levite had on their agenda for the day.

Now, as Jesus is telling the story to the lawyer, who, by the

way, was a learn-ed and religious professional of the day – an expert in the law and Torah, Jesus knows that just the word Samaritan will make the lawyer's ears perk up. While a priest was as high as you could go in Jewish society (and a Levite was up there right below a priest), a Samaritan was on the exact opposite end of that spectrum.

“Just a bit of Jewish history: by the time Jesus and the lawyer were having this exchange, Jews and Samaritan had hated each other for over 1,000 years. When King Solomon died, the monarchy broke into two factions. The ten tribes of the north rebelled and founded a capital in the city of Samaria. The two southern tribes made their capital in Jerusalem. And there was this long held ethnic hostility and political and religious rivalry between Jews and Samaritans.”¹ Think of it as a big family feud...a rift was formed years and years ago that is still causing earthquakes today.

¹ Rev. Dr. Amy Butler, “C33: The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C (2019),” *A Sermon for Every Sunday*,

accessed on July 14, 2019 at <https://vimeo.com/337172967>.

When Jesus said the word Samaritan in this story, the lawyer immediately thought he knew the story of this man...and where that man fell in the ranks of power. He was low, really low. Not honorable. Not trustworthy. Not godly. Not because of who he was, but because of who his ancestors were...years ago.

Yet, leave it to Jesus to use the unexpected person to be the hero in the end. You know what happens. The Samaritan is the one who sees, stops, and helps – the one who stops his life to extend compassion...without a timetable on his care. The Samaritan was the “good” guy,² as we’ve come to call him: the “Good” Samaritan.

Jesus doesn’t call the Samaritan “Good.” Jesus doesn’t say the priest and Levite are “Bad” ...those are our words, our judgements. Jesus doesn’t assign blame or make some moral or ethical statement on how to act in every situation. Jesus just simply asks the question, “*Which of these three, do you think was a*

neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” “*Who* was the neighbor in this situation?” Another way to put it is: “who *acted* as a neighbor to the man?”

Jesus gets us out of the framework of judging some people as “good” and others as “bad,” some as “neighbors” and others as “strangers.” Jesus doesn’t judge the behavior of anyone. He simply asks us to think about the behaviors exhibited in this story and answer the question: whose behavior was that of a neighbor?

Jesus answers the lawyer’s question with a story and another question, but he doesn’t even really answer the lawyer’s question because remember, – the lawyer’s question was this: “And *who* is my neighbor?”

It’s almost as if the lawyer hopes that Jesus will say something specific and lawyer-y, as Frederick Buechner creatively imagines:

“Very well: henceforth a neighbor (hereafter referred to

² Butler, *ibid.*

as the party of the first part) shall be defined as meaning a person of Jewish descent whose legal residence is within a radius of no more than three statute miles from one's own legal residence, unless there is another person of Jewish descent (hereafter referred to as the party of the second part) living closer to the party of the first part than one is oneself, in which case the party of the second part is to be construed as the neighbor to the party of the first part and one is then oneself relieved of all responsibility of any kind to the matters hereunto appertaining.”³

We can laugh at how ridiculous this sounds, but take away all the lawyer-y language and essentially we kind of want a similar answer, don't we? Something specific? So we could focus our love and efforts? It'd be much easier if Jesus said – okay, your neighbors are Canadians and Mexicans and Italians and Rwandans and people with red hair and people with glasses and maybe on occasion people

who are shorter than five feet tall. If we had specifics, then we'd know where to focus our love and care and who we could let other people care for. Wouldn't it be much easier if we had certain people who were the “right” people to love and everyone else we didn't have to worry about? Then we would know when it was worth it to interrupt our day to help someone rather than having to debate and wonder if we should help this person or not.

But Jesus doesn't do this – he does not give a legal definition but instead tells a story.⁴ Jesus doesn't give a black and white answer to the question “And who is my neighbor?” so that we can easily know “right” from “wrong”. Who we should help and who we shouldn't help. If he had done that, he knows that inevitably, he would have forgotten someone or left some category of person out. Rather, Jesus gives a more timeless response – one that doesn't let any of us off the hook. whether we live near Jerusalem and Jericho in the first century or halfway around

³ Scott Hoezee, “Luke 10:25-37,” *Center for Excellence in Preaching* (July 3, 2016), accessed on July 14, 2019 at https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-10c/?type=the_lectionary_gospel.

⁴ Hoezee, *ibid*.

the world in Denver, CO in 2019.

Like the lawyer, we want to be able to scan our society around us to see who out there counts as our neighbor. But Jesus says that figuring that out is no important...it's the wrong question. What is more important is making sure that you yourself act as a neighbor – today – to whoever you meet. Whoever those “other” folks out in society are, how they treat you, what they look like, whether or not they seem like folks with whom you have some stuff in common, whether or not you think they deserve your help or not, that is not nearly so important as making sure that whoever they are, you act as if you are *their* neighbor.

“*Who is my neighbor?*” the lawyer asked. Jesus says, that’s not the right question. It’s not going to help you love God or love others. It will actually slow you down. What will help you is if you ask yourself this: “*Am I being a good neighbor to this person in this situation?*”

Which is so much harder of a question, right?

If we could just define neighbor more specifically then we could limit our love to that group of people, we could conserve our compassion for the moments where it matters. If we are to always act like a neighbor to anybody and everybody – then how are we ever supposed to know what to do or who to help? Jesus doesn’t really expect us just to help anyone, right? Doesn’t it matter who they are and what our relationship and responsibility to them is?

You see, we have taught ourselves to know “right” from “wrong” if we know how to categorize people. If we know what label to give them. We love labels and categories. Citizen or undocumented person. Friend or Bully. Family Member or Stranger. Guilty or Innocent. Christian, Muslim. Educated or Uneducated. White collar or Blue collar. Sometimes labels serve a purpose. More often than not though, we end up using labels not to help us understand people more deeply, but rather to help us understand whether or not people are like us so we can determine what our responsibility to them is.

In other words, we decide whether or not they are our neighbor or our enemy, our friend or our foe, our ally or our adversary...so that we can decide how we are to treat them. Well, Jesus wants us to decide how we are going to treat them first, before we ever know who they are or how we are to categorize them or fit them into our understanding of society. And how he wants us to treat them is clear: with radical hospitality and compassion.

When Jesus says to the lawyer, “*go and do likewise*” he’s saying to all of us, “Stop trying to decide who is or isn’t your neighbor...and act as a neighbor to all who are in need...all who you cross your path. Don’t avert your eyes or cross to the other side of the street or switch off the news when you see something you don’t like or that makes you uncomfortable. Ask yourself, ‘What does it mean for me to be a neighbor to this person?’”

Perhaps even more powerfully, setting aside everything else I think I know about this person and how they may or may not

have ended up in the situation they were in, if it was their fault or the systems fault, if there was another way or if they chose this way knowing the risks, yadda yadda...setting all of that stuff aside (and you know we all have all kinds of that stuff running in our heads all the time...it’s the manna that the 24/7 news cycle feeds on)...if we can set all those questions aside, perhaps it’s most powerful to ask ourselves, “*If this were me*, dying on the side of the road, beat up and hurt and in need of shelter and food and a safe and healing place to recover and live...*if this were me*...how would I want to be treated? Would I hope and pray that someone would see me and act in a loving, neighborly way? Who cares if they actually think of me as a neighbor...that’s probably not the first thought of a dying or hurting or suffering person. The first thought is – who will help me survive...who will help me. Who will act as a neighbor to me, whether I know them or not, whether I deserve their trust or not, whether they’ll ever get repaid or not, *who will be my neighbor?*”

This parable challenges us to examine the intentions and reasons behind our actions. And really just to set them aside. It's kind of like Jesus is saying, "stop overthinking this. Just act. Don't worry about what precedent your help might set for the future. Don't worry about what people will think. Don't worry about what is the perfect legislation. Don't worry about what it will cost you or how it will change your day or your country. Don't worry about whether your rights are being infringed upon by their predicament. Get away from the self-centered universe where you are want to reside and just ask yourself, "what does it mean to act like a neighbor who actually cares for this person?"

This stuff is not black and white. This stuff is not about right or wrong. It's about human compassion. Human decency. Human pain and suffering. And human love. And that is messy. It's not easy. But it's real. And it's what matters. What really matters.

Jesus asks us not to worry about who is our neighbor but to worry about whether we are

acting like a neighbor to the person right in front of us – whether that's on the street or the T.V. screen or right next to me tonight.

We will all answer that question differently. We don't have to have the same answer. But we do have to grapple with the question. It's amazing how – in my mind – when I know that acting with compassion is going to cost me something more than what I'm willing to give (whether that's time, or money, or rights, or pride, or privilege, etc.) – how quickly something goes from being the "right" thing to do to become "not the right thing" for this particular situation because of "such and such reason."

Excuse, excuse. Justification, justification. Many of which are real excuses and real reasons. They are valid. That doesn't make them the compassionate thing to do.

Jesus is saying in this parable – stop justifying, stop explaining, stop trying to argue about whether or not to help this person because you don't know whether he was beaten or whether he was a drug addict or whether he brought this on

himself or someone else brought it on him. He's hurt. Can you see that he is hurting? He is human. He is me. He is you. He is all of us. Help. Act like a neighbor. Forget "right" and "wrong"...you know how to love, don't you? Love him. Care for him.

As Jewish philosopher Martin Buber says, *"For God does not want to be believed in, to be debated and defended by us, but quite simply to be realized through us."*

Jesus tells us this story and he doesn't say that the Samaritan is good and the priest and the Levite are bad. He just simply asks us a question that allows us to see that the Samaritan chose, in that moment, to show compassion to the beaten man: "Which of these three was a neighbor to the man who was beaten and robbed?"

"The One Who Showed Mercy," the lawyer answers.

To which Jesus replied, *"Go and do likewise."*

The lawyer was able to speak the right answer, but ultimately

was he able to go and actually do the right thing?

We will never know. And we don't need to know what he did. All we need to know is what we will do.

And so – what will you do?

Amen.