

Providence Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Dr. David Pettit  
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Luke 10: ?

I've been preaching on a weekly basis for about fifteen years. As one who typically follows the lectionary cycle, it means that this would be my fifth time preaching on this passage, a very familiar and heavily interpreted parable. One of the challenges of preaching over many years is the discipline to continually come to the scriptures with open eyes and fresh questions. No matter how many times we come to the scriptures, we will never fully "figure it out." There isn't just one sermon on a passage that you stick in the filing cabinet for the next time. Rather, the discipline, as I see it, is to come anew and to see what catches our attention, what emerges, what does God have to say at this juncture, at this point of life, at this cultural moment.

My mentor used to say that sermons were like bread. You preach it while it is fresh, but it goes stale quickly. That is why he did not even save his sermons, or at least not in a way he could ever access or find again. This is part of why, when we have our Ruminations gatherings and read scripture and poetry together, I don't ask what you think it means, I ask what stands out to you on this reading, what catches your attention? You see too often we fixate on ultimate meaning, but the Christ who teaches in parables asks us to be open and present in the moment to see what emerges now, what is God saying to us in this particular moment?

Now this type of question implicates a certain view of humanity, of who we are, of who God invites us to be. We are followers, we are ever growing and changing, and reengaging the scriptures as we grow and deepen in our faith. It is more important to be open and learning than to think we have it figured out. Questions matter because they invite different responses and implicate different assumptions.

So, as I have been sitting with this familiar story lately, what has been sticking out to me is not the beautiful dynamics of the parable itself, but the initial question that sparks the exchange, that leads to the Jesus telling this parable. What has stuck out to me is the consistent use of the "I" pronoun and concerns for one's own fate, one's own justification. You see, the question we start out with has a way of shaping the answers we get. It usually comes from an assumption and re-affirms and reifies that assumption. A question can open up a conversation, or try to pin someone down. For example, I can ask you, "where did you get that shirt?" or I can phrase it, "so you thought that shirt was a good idea, huh?" Similar questions, and yet, the kind of response these questions elicit will be quite different.

Well, we are told one of the lawyers sought to test Jesus. Lawyer here means an expert on Torah, an expert in the law that is the Hebrew scriptures. He is testing Jesus to see if he knows his Torah, to see how his interpretive skills are. And so, he is engaging Jesus in a kind of midrash. By midrash I mean, an exchange of questions and answers, arguments and counter-arguments, all meant to open up the scriptures and to debate interpretation, and in the best possibility, learn something in doing so. The verb, דָּרַשׁ “darash” means: to explore, to seek, to investigate, to fathom, to study. Through question and answer they would dialogue, argue, but really, ideally, seek, explore, and fathom the intricacies of the law.

Now Luke frames it in such a way that suggests the lawyer is testing to see if Jesus is much of a rabbi. He is seeing if Jesus knows the scriptures to cite in answering. But his question is significant, nonetheless. Because questions matter.

Growing up in a non-denominational church and in the era of the Billy Graham crusades, this question has a familiar ring to it. How does one get saved? How does one access salvation—personal salvation. The focus was all on one’s personal standing before God. Was one saved or subject to damnation, and how did one know. Now, to say this is the same as the Billy Graham altar call would be a misconstrual. But there is a similar focus on one’s-self and one’s deeds and standings.

Well, Jesus is not too flustered by the question. He knows his Torah. And so, he plays the game, he joins the back and forth. Jesus replies with his own question, and the lawyer responds with the corresponding scriptures. And Jesus responds with the same kind of straightforward assurance: “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” So far, their exchange, their questions, presume a certain straightforwardness. The presumption or assumption is that you can fulfill God’s law, fulfill the tradition, can inherit eternal life. It reaffirms that the most important thing is one’s standing, and that there are a limited itemizable number of actions that can secure it for oneself. It is achievable.

What is not clear is how extensive or how numerous those actions are. How many good deeds does one have to do to overcome one’s mistakes? How many kind actions make one approvable in God’s sight? Who do we have to show love toward so that we can still achieve salvation, inherit eternal life? Have you ever been preoccupied with such questions? Ever been worried that one has done enough?

The conversation is reinforcing this focus on the self as one who does good things and who can achieve eternal life through identifiable actions. The question has reinforced and reified itself.

Well, the conversation continues. The lawyer asks another interpretive question. “And who is my neighbor?” Now, I’m not sure what scripture the lawyer would have expected Jesus to cite in response, or that he would have cited if Jesus put the question back to him again. But this is where Jesus inserts his own tactic, to not give the pat answer, but to engage in reinterpreting the law through a parable, a story. Instead of giving an answer, he tells a parable that complicates the notion of who one’s neighbor is.

Now the question the lawyer goes with here is interesting. He could have asked a lot of questions at this point. He could have asked about what it means to love with one’s whole heart, and prompt Jesus to respond from scripture and the tradition. He could have asked what it means to love with one’s whole soul, he could have asked what it means to love with all one’s strength or mind. He does not ask those questions. Rather, he asks who his neighbor is, the implication being, “who am I responsible for?”

What strikes me is that these questions continue this way of thinking that is self-focused and tends to think of our own interests as being in conflict or tension with that of others. It continues to reify this tendency to justify ourselves, to be most involved with and concerned with ourselves, and to see the needs of others as a conflict of interests, sort of speak. What do we have to do? How much? Who do we have to take care of? Who is our neighbor? And our actions or generosity towards others tends to be very itemizable and cordoned off. By that I mean, you can do your deed and then go home. But Jesus tells a story that makes the matter of one’s neighbor neither clear nor easily achievable, nor cordoned off with clear lines of ownership and responsibility.

He tells a story about a man face down on the side of the road, a road that everybody traveled. And he gives no details of the person. Why is this important? Well, a neighbor in Israelite parlance meant a fellow Israelite, or someone of your clan and connections, someone you had enjoyed table-fellowship with, someone who you have responsibility toward and for. A neighbor was not understood as just anybody. So, Jesus frames the story in a way that the listener can’t tell if the person face down in the ditch is a neighbor or not. In doing so, Jesus has cleverly turned the lawyer’s question to reframe it now. Whereas they were in this pattern reinforcing this preoccupation with one’s standing, now the story is turning and

opening up a new interpretation of what it means to love one's neighbor, and with it new questions.

The story features a non-Israelite; a Samaritan. It features someone not so consumed with their own concerns of salvation or holiness. It features someone not so consumed with their resources or their calendar of events, someone who is more available to be entwined with others rather than being isolated and insulated from others. It features someone not so consumed with their own cleanness and ability to enter the temple so that they are available to touch the unclean, something Jesus often got in trouble for himself.

And when Jesus gets to the end of the story, he has reframed the question, because the questions matter. He asks the lawyer not who his neighbor is, but who was a neighbor to the man in need? The answer being not some scriptural reference rearticulating what the lawyer already knows, but rather a new interpretation that makes the hero of the story the Samaritan. The answer shows that the whole question has been reframed. And in doing so, Jesus makes it hard to maintain the initial question with its preoccupations. Because then you'd have to ask, how many people in the ditch do I have to help in order to achieve my eternal life? Where does it end? How much do I have to spend to help this person and what if they come to expect it or demand it? We continue with the initial preoccupations. We continue in this path of uncertainty and trying to achieve.

But perhaps Jesus is inviting and provoking us to change the questions, and to consider what it means to be human and a follower of Christ. Maybe we have started with conceptions that need to be updated.

The poet David Whyte, who we read last week, he has this expression. He says, "There is no self that will survive a real conversation." What he means is that the whole point of conversation, of exchange, of midrash and its seeking and probing, is to grow and change and deepen. And if we truly encounter others, even as the Samaritan encounters the man in the ditch, we will not be the same, and that is a good thing. Our questions will hopefully change and develop. "There is no self that will survive a real conversation." He continues, "There's no self that will survive a real meeting with something other than itself. There's no organization that will keep its original identity if it's in the conversation. And after a while you realize, you don't want to actually keep that old static identity."

You see, we often entertain the parable of the Good Samaritan, but we may struggle with it because we keep the initial question intact. We keep this focus on ourself and our achieving and our self-justification and our own standing. And we

re-ify and reinforce the tension between our needs and the needs of others, our interests and the interests of others, our responsibility and the responsibility of others. And so it is hard to live out the parable of the Good Samaritan, because we have not changed the question, even though Jesus has.

Our poem this morning is a type of prayer, seeking to overcome our preoccupation with such limiting questions. It recognizes this tension we seem bound to, that to care for others compromises our own integrity. Now I have truncated the rather playful full title of the poem lest I turn anyone off. The actual title is, “Why I Voted the Socialist Ticket.” It is obviously a provocative title, because we tend to associate the word socialist with some kind of evil, or twisted logic. But the poem expresses that desire to overcome this tension – that of my interests verses others. It is a type of prayer without knowing exactly how to do it, which may actually be the best type of prayer.

I am unjust, but I can strive for justice.  
My life’s unkind, but I can vote for kindness.  
I, the unloving, say life should be lovely.  
I, that am blind, cry out against my blindness.

Man is a curious brute—he pets his fancies—  
Fighting mankind, to win sweet luxury.  
So he will be, though law be clear as crystal,  
Tho’ all men plan to live in harmony.

Come, let us vote against our human nature,  
Crying to God in all the polling places  
To heal our everlasting sinfulness

And make us sages with transfigured faces.

Transfigured faces. Changed questions, voting against our own predictable tendencies. Able to move beyond the old limiting preoccupation with our own salvation and how many good deeds we must do, to a new kind of discipleship, a new kind of relationship with the divine, a new kind of compassion and loving-kindness.

So as you go this morning, I want you to go with parable in your mind and the invitation to be a neighbor to others. But, I really want you to consider, what questions or assumptions of yours would Jesus like to change. What questions does Jesus want to reframe for us, so that we can fulfill the law of the Lord better? Because questions matter, and they dictate the kind of answer we may get. And all God’s people said...

“There is no self that will survive a real conversation. There’s no self that will survive a real meeting with something other than itself. There’s no organisation that will keep its original identity if it’s in the conversation. And after a while you realise you don’t want to actually keep that old static identity. You want to move the pivot of your presence from this thing you think is you, into this meeting with the future, with the people you serve, with your family, with your loved ones. It’s in this self-forgetfulness where you meet something other than yourself that all kinds of astonishing things happen.” --David Whyte

### *The Parable of the Good Samaritan*

*(Mt 22:34–40; Mk 12:28–34)*

<sup>25</sup> Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>26</sup> He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” <sup>27</sup> He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” <sup>28</sup> And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

<sup>29</sup> But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” <sup>30</sup> Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup> Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup> So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. <sup>34</sup> He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. <sup>35</sup> The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ <sup>36</sup> Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” <sup>37</sup> He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”