

“Who Is My Neighbor?”
Based on Luke 10: 25-37
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So, a lawyer walks into an inn...

Actually, there is a lawyer involved, but it's no joke. Not by any means. That day, there was a crowd gathered around Jesus, listening to him teach. And as often happens, a lawyer who had been listening carefully for quite some time at last spoke up and asked, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And it was obvious to me that the lawyer was not asking for his own edification. He knew the answer to his question. He was just testing Jesus, trying to get him mixed up, or get him to make a mistake or make a fool out of himself and embarrass himself, or—preferably—all of the above. But Jesus played along. He acted as though the lawyer's question was earnest and Jesus answered the question. But as he often did, he answered the question with a question. He turned the tables on him and made the lawyer answer the question himself. And the first part of the answer the lawyer gave is what we call the *shma* from the first word in the Hebrew. It comes from the scroll of Deuteronomy “*shma* Israel”—“Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”¹ Then the lawyer added from Leviticus, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”²

These two laws are so vitally important to our faith. It was the perfect answer. But though the answer is entirely correct, the lawyer still missed another vital aspect of the law—to follow not only the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law. While it may be true that the lawyer did love God with all his soul, mind and strength, it was clear to me, and I'm sure to Jesus, that the lawyer wasn't loving his neighbor as himself. He was so proud of himself, thinking he was going to trap and humiliate Jesus, only to have Jesus turn the tables on him. You should have seen the lawyer's face flash red when Jesus told him, “You have given the correct answer do this and you will live.” As though Jesus were the teacher, his superior, and the lawyer were his pupil—which of course was the case but I'm sure the lawyer didn't see it that way. I have to admit, moments like that give me such joy—seeing Jesus put the high and mighty in their place.

But the lawyer wasn't about to let Jesus get by with that. Still determined to get the best of Jesus, he asked, “and who is my neighbor?” I half expected Jesus to answer with a question again, “who do you say is your neighbor?” But one thing I've learned is that Jesus is far from predicable. If you expect him to say or do one thing, it's pretty much a guarantee he's not going to do it. And of course, this time he didn't answer with a question but with a story. The story was so commonplace and yet so hard to believe. Jesus told a story about a man getting robbed on the road to Jericho. Unfortunately, that part is all too real. It happens all the time. And in the story Jesus told, first a priest and then a Levite came down the road toward the man and rather than helping him, crossed over to the other side of the road in

¹ Deuteronomy 6:4-5

² Leviticus 19:18

order to pass by as far from the man as possible. Who knows exactly why they crossed over to the other side? Perhaps to assuage their own guilt; perhaps to avoid being defiled. Since the man had been beaten and left for dead, maybe they thought he was dead and assumed that they could not help and would only defile themselves by coming in contact with the man. Again, none of this was surprising, it happens all the time. And while those of us listening to the story shook our heads and uttered our “tsk, tsks” under our breath, I wonder how many of us would have behaved in the same way? Would I have stuck my neck out to help the man? I like to think I would, but honestly? I can’t say for sure I would. I’d probably keep walking, coming up with as many excuses as I could for why it was ok, or even best, that I not stop for the man. Meanwhile, I’d pray to God for forgiveness and I’d pray that the man would be ok.

But then the story goes way beyond the ordinary. The next man to come by and see the victim is a Samaritan. Well, we all knew where this was going; obviously the Samaritan isn’t going to help. We all know that Samaritans are ungodly, unethical, villains. For that matter, it was probably Samaritans who robbed the man in the first place. But then Jesus says that the Samaritan stops to help the man. A Samaritan! You should have heard the mumbling in the crowd when Jesus said that the Samaritan stopped. I think the lawyer was the loudest of all with a distinct, “hmp!” And when Jesus topped that off by saying, that the Samaritan was moved with pity. People started mumbling to each other, “what did he say?” “what’s he talking about?” “well, I never...!” But Jesus paid no attention to our grumbling and went on with his story, saying that the Samaritan cleaned and bandaged the wounds himself with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal and took him to an inn where he hired the innkeeper to care for the man, paying the innkeeper and promising to come back and repay the innkeeper for any costs of caring for the man. By this time most of us were really drawn in to the story. Sure, there were still a few skeptics. I heard someone say, “I bet he never came back and left the innkeeper stuck with the cost,” but now those comments were met with a chorus of “sh!” and dirty looks.

After a short pause to let us all think about his story, Jesus turned back to the lawyer and said, “which of these men was a neighbor to the man who was robbed?” The last thing the lawyer wanted to do was answer that question. The answer was obvious and yet, how could he admit that a Samaritan—and not the priest or Levite—had done the right thing? How could he admit that a Samaritan even COULD do the right thing? And how could he admit that Jesus had taught him something? I sure was glad not to have to be answering Jesus especially with a big group of people looking on. But the lawyer had to answer. And reluctantly, he did. “The one who showed him mercy,” he said in a voice so faint I could barely hear it. People further back in the crowd had to ask, “what did he say?” As word passed through the crowd, “the one who showed him mercy” it was met with gasps, and “ahs.” Then Jesus said, “go and do likewise” and he wasn’t looking at the lawyer, he was looking directly at me. At least, that was how it felt. Later, talking with some friends about it, they all said they thought Jesus was looking at *them* when he said, “go and do likewise.”

And that’s what we did. Slowly, the crowd thinned out as people headed home to think about it what it all means. Some of my friends had real trouble getting over the fact

that it was a Samaritan who Jesus was telling us to be like. And it is really hard to accept that part, that Jesus made a Samaritan the hero of his story. But then someone reminded us that Jesus also keeps telling us that we're supposed to love our enemy. And that makes the whole Samaritan thing make a little more sense.

I guess it wasn't only the high and mighty lawyer being put in his place that day.

I used to always think that loving my neighbor as myself just meant the people I come in contact with on a regular basis. The people who live by me. The people who are like me. And it's hard enough to love them. Especially people like John's widow who's always begging even though John left her with more money than I'll ever see. And I'm positive she's stolen fresh bread out of my window at least three times. I wouldn't mind it so much if she were really needy, but she has more money than anyone I know. She should be feeding me! But I do try to love her, just as we're commanded to do.

And Mary, the wife of Judas. I try to love her, too, even though she always does her laundry on the same day as me and gets her things on the clothes line first so I have to wait to put mine up. I know she does it on purpose. One morning I acted like I was just making small-talk with her and asked her what she had planned for the day and she told me a whole long list of things she would be doing, going to the market, baking bread, and some other things but she didn't say a WORD about laundry, so as soon as we were done talking, I went down to the river to do my laundry and not five minutes later Mary shows up with a basket of laundry and finishes up before me and hurries back to hang it up on the laundry line leaving no room for my laundry. I couldn't believe it. But like I said, I really try to love Mary. I really do. And that's hard enough but now I'm supposed to love Samaritans, too?

But I guess if a Samaritan can have compassion on one of us from Jerusalem, maybe we that should help us to have compassion on Samaritans. To have pity on someone, after all, is a sign of humanity and maybe Jesus wanted to point out to us that even those who we think of as inferior to us are human, too. And if they are human, they are our neighbor. And if they are our neighbor, we are to love them. We are to take care of them. We are to tend to their needs. In order to help others love God with all their soul, mind and strength—their mind, body, and soul—we need to tend to the needs of their mind, body and soul. Loving our neighbor and loving our enemy is more than just not harming them. To ignore people we'd rather not have anything to do with is not to love them.

And most of us were so caught up on the whole "Samaritan" factor that we forgot the "love God with all our soul, mind and strength" part. I think we take that for granted, because there is no easy gage of that. How do I know if I am loving God with my entire being—mind, body and soul? Does loving God with all my mind, body and soul require me to love my neighbor as myself? Even the bread-stealing widow and the laundry-line hording neighbor? Even the Samaritan?