

The Loving Samaritan

Luke 10.25-37, NRSV

Paul Bailey

²⁵ Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” ²⁷ 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.” ²⁸ And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰ 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. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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.’ ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” ³⁷ He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

As we read this story, I want us to move beyond the heroic into the realistic, at least just for the next few minutes. Before we judge the priest and the Levite who walked over on the other side too harshly, let’s for a few minutes, walk in their shoes. I want to begin by asking why did both the Priest and the Levite pass by on the other side of the road? The simple answer is that they did exactly what was commanded and expected of them in Mosaic Law. There were strict rules regarding the conduct of priests, especially in the area of ceremonial cleanliness. For example, look at Leviticus 21.10-12:

¹⁰ The priest who is exalted above his fellows, on whose head the anointing oil has been poured and who has been consecrated to wear the vestments, shall not dishevel his hair, nor tear his vestments. ¹¹ He shall not go where there is a dead body; he shall not defile himself even for his father or mother. ¹² He shall not go outside the

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sanctuary and thus profane the sanctuary of his God; for the consecration of the anointing oil of his God is upon him: I am the LORD.

Again, read Ezekiel 44.15ff:

“⁵ But the levitical priests, the descendants of Zadok, ... ¹⁶ It is they who shall enter my sanctuary, it is they who shall approach my table, to minister to me, and they shall keep my charge. ¹⁷ When they enter the gates of the inner court, they shall wear linen vestments; they shall have nothing of wool on them, while they minister at the gates of the inner court, and within. ¹⁸ They shall have linen turbans on their heads, and linen undergarments on their loins; they shall not bind themselves with anything that causes sweat. ¹⁹ When they go out into the outer court to the people, they shall remove the vestments in which they have been ministering, and lay them in the holy chambers; and they shall put on other garments, so that they may not communicate holiness to the people with their vestments. ²⁰ They shall not shave their heads or let their locks grow long; they shall only trim the hair of their heads. ²¹ No priest shall drink wine when he enters the inner court. ²² They shall not marry a widow, or a divorced woman, but only a virgin of the stock of the house of Israel, or a widow who is the widow of a priest. ²³ They shall teach my people the difference between the holy and the common, and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean. ²⁴ In a controversy they shall act as judges, and they shall decide it according to my judgments. They shall keep my laws and my statutes regarding all my appointed festivals, and they shall keep my sabbaths holy. ²⁵ They shall not defile themselves by going near to a dead person; for father or mother, however, and for son or daughter, and for brother or unmarried sister they may defile themselves. ²⁶ After he has become clean, they shall count seven days for him.”

The priest could not go near a ‘half-dead’ man, not even if he was a member of his immediate family, without becoming unclean and therefore unfit to do his duties as a priest. To go near a dead body would mean defilement. Defilement would mean that the priest would not be able to serve at the altar. This was significant not only because each

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priest would take turns to serve at the altar and would have to wait a long time before their turn came to actually serve. By serving at the altar came the priest be able feed themselves and their families by the meat left over from various sacrifices.

Similarly, Levites were members of the priestly tribe. They were the tribe from where the high priests were drawn. Levites also had a wide range of temple responsibilities which included:

- Had charge of the tabernacle in camp and on the march, and of the temple,
- Bore the ark of the covenant, Ministered before the ark,
- Custodians and administrators of the tithes and other offerings,
- Prepared the consecrated bread,
- Assisted the priests in preparing the sacrifice, .
- Killed the passover for the children of the captivity, Ezra 6:20,21.
- Teachers of the law, Deut. 33:10; 2 Chr. 17:8,9; 30:22; 35:3; Neh. 8:7-13; Mal. 2:6,7.
- Were judges, Deut. 17:9; 1 Chr. 23:4; 26:29; 2 Chr. 19:8-11; Neh. 11:16.
- Were scribes of the sacred books.
- Pronounced the blessings of the law in the responsive service at Mount Gerizim, Deut. 27:12; Josh. 8:33.
- Were doorkeepers.
- Were overseers in building and the repairs of the temple, 1 Chr. 23:2-4; Ezra 3:8,9.
- Were musicians of the temple service.
- Supervised weights and measures, 1 Chr. 23:29.
- Sealed the covenant with Nehemiah, Nehemiah 10.9-28

It can be argued that the temple was the life of the Levite. It is not surprising that both the priest and the Levite did the right thing. However, the way of Jesus calls us to go beyond doing just right thing; and to do the compassionate or loving thing. The right thing for the Samaritan was to walk on by and leave the in the hands of his God and the care of his own community. However, this Samaritan was not just good, he was better than that. A good Samaritan would have just let his hated enemy. But this Samaritan showed compassion.

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Wrapped up in this little story is the whole message of redemptive love. The God who is hated by a fallen broken humanity comes to us, even though he is considered to be an enemy, he comes in overwhelming, outrageous love and compassion and takes the time to clean and dress our wounds and then allows us to recover. The God who is revealed in Christ Jesus is not just good; he is better than that. God's goodness and God's justice demands that we, broken, fallen humanity, suffer and endure the full consequence for our sinful choices; yet God's love and compassion compels him to cross the road and get involved.

The way of Jesus calls us to do more than the right or good thing. Listen to Paul reflecting on the love of Jesus in Romans 5:

God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. ⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸ But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Christ Jesus goes beyond the limits of goodness into infinity of love. The way of Jesus calls us to do more than what is good; Jesus calls us to do more than was the letter of the Law requires. He calls us into another, higher dimension of reality; he calls us to love and compassion. He calls us to do more than the right thing; he calls us to do the loving thing. And sometimes that loving thing is in direct contradiction to the right thing. If the priest and the Levite were to do the loving thing and help their fallen brother, they would have risked themselves; moreover to do the loving thing would have been costly both to the men themselves and to their families who depending on them. Doing the loving thing is dangerous, expensive and personally inconvenient; but you can't change the world from the sanitary comfort of your armchair or sofa.

What threw this lawyer (that is, an expert in interpreting and applying Mosaic law) was that in seeking to justify himself he exposed himself to the light of love and in the light of

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love, our religious righteousness is as 'filthy rags' and unclean in the extreme. So Jesus ends in a challenge to go beyond what is right and good and to live in love. For his punch line Jesus asks:

³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" ³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

That is our challenge to "go and do likewise"; to go and be living demonstrations of God's love and mercy wherever we are.

Let's pray.