

## “Who Is My Neighbor?”

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For most of us, probably,  
the story of the Good Samaritan<sup>1</sup> is so familiar,  
we hardly know how to hear it any more.  
We think we don't have to listen, we start glazing over, tuning out.  
We think we know what it says.  
And maybe we do, but maybe we *don't*.

Listen:

The story starts before you think it does.  
It starts with a question: *Who is my neighbor?*  
Luke tells us Jesus has been teaching now for about three years,  
traveling around the countryside.  
Now Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem.  
We know, and maybe he knew too, he was walking toward his death.  
But not yet, not quite yet.  
Today he meets a man with a question on his mind.  
This man is Jewish, like Jesus;  
he's a lawyer, a scholar, an expert in the law of Moses.  
He comes up to Jesus and asks,  
“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”  
It's the question of every religion, really:  
What are we supposed to be doing here on earth?  
How are we supposed to live?  
What are we supposed to do so that, when we do it,  
we know we are right with the world?

Luke tells us the lawyer is asking this question “to test Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>  
And *that's* a little odd. He wanted to test him. Why?

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 10:25–37.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 10:25.

The lawyer has been listening to Jesus teach,  
and he's probably heard the stories, too,  
about this man who heals people,  
who sits down to eat with the much-loathed tax collectors,  
this man who tells people to love their enemies at all cost.  
Well, that is not what our lawyer is used to.  
Our lawyer is part of a strand of Judaism that focuses on *purity*.  
In his kind of Judaism, it matters what you eat, with whom you eat,  
what you wear, how you keep the Sabbath.  
And he is an expert on this stuff.  
His way of being religious isn't wrong,  
it's helped his people survive under a hostile military occupation  
that has no love for their culture and their traditions.  
But now here comes Jesus preaching and teaching  
in the prophetic tradition of Judaism  
that says *nothing* is more important  
than doing justice and practicing love.

This is the same prophetic tradition that had Amos thundering,

I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.<sup>3</sup>

And Micah, who asks us,

[W]hat does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?<sup>4</sup>

Jesus walks in this tradition, too.  
He heals people on the Sabbath.

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<sup>3</sup> Amos 5:21, 24.

<sup>4</sup> Micah 6:8.

He reaches out to the outcasts of his society.  
He breaks the rules to help people in need.  
And how must that have sounded to a guy  
who has devoted his career  
to getting the legal t's crossed and i's dotted?  
Shocking? Outrageous?  
And maybe...tempting? Liberating? Thrilling, even?

Our lawyer is *testing* Jesus,  
and I wonder if deep in his heart of hearts he is wildly attracted  
to Jesus's message, to his presence, his way of being in the world,  
though he is too defended to admit it, even to himself.  
Testing is a way of engaging without having to admit you want to;  
it's a way of hoping while pretending to be cynical.  
When we test someone, we're saying belligerently,  
"Go on, disappoint me!"  
even as our hearts whisper, "*Please be for real—  
please don't disappoint me.*"

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"  
That question which is everyone's question—  
what am I supposed to be doing with this life?  
How can I be at peace?  
How can I stop feeling afraid of dying?

And in the best rabbinic tradition, Jesus responds with a question:  
"What is written in the law? What do you read there?"  
He's talking to a Jewish scholar,  
someone he knows has devoted his life to following Jewish law.  
Jesus is saying, you tell me what *you* think the answer is—  
Jesus knows this man wouldn't be asking if he really knew,  
if he really felt at peace with himself and his life,  
if he really had stopped being afraid.  
But he also knows we all have to find our own way in the end.  
So he's saying, *Think it through. Use your head. Use your heart.*  
"What must I do?" "What does the law say?"

And now our lawyer finds himself on familiar ground,  
as he quotes the famous passages from the Torah:  
“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,  
and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5)  
and “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:8).  
Jesus says, “You have given the right answer;  
do this, and you will live.”

Up to now this is so much like the scene we heard about  
in the reading today,  
the scene in Mark when Jesus is already in Jerusalem,  
and a scribe, another Jewish scholar, asks him,  
what is the first commandment of all—  
what is the essence of the law?  
In that scene, which takes place just days before Jesus is killed,  
Jesus quotes those same words again:  
“you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,  
and with all your soul, and with all your mind,  
and with all your strength...  
[and] You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”  
For this people, at this time,  
this is *the* message of the Jewish tradition.  
It’s the heart of everything.  
*Do this, and you will live.*

And the story of the lawyer might have ended there, but it doesn’t.  
It can’t end yet because *he’s* not finished.  
These words, this precious heart of the Jewish tradition,  
haven’t really reached him.  
They have not yet become saving words for him.  
And we know this when we hear the lawyer ask:  
“Who is my neighbor?”  
*Who is my neighbor?*

Now, *we* know what’s coming next—  
we know Jesus is about to tell the story of the Good Samaritan,

and we love to hear that story,  
and because we are so familiar with it  
we tend to think this lawyer must be a real jerk for asking.  
We want to yell at him,  
“*Everybody* is your neighbor, you big ding-a-ling!”  
And, indeed, Luke tells us the lawyer “want[ed] to justify himself.”  
He wanted to prove, to Jesus and probably to himself,  
that he was a good person.  
And isn’t that all of us, wanting to justify ourselves,  
to others and especially to our own self?  
But don’t we all know how to recognize that movement in ourselves,  
that wish to impress, to put up a good front—  
and don’t we know how hollow it really feels?  
We are looking for so much more than making a good impression.  
We are looking for life itself,  
we are looking for liberation and strength and courage and peace.

So is our lawyer.  
He’s just struggling. As do we all.  
He’s wrestling with what his religion has taught him.  
He’s struggling to find that life-giving message in his religion.  
And his question, “Who is my neighbor?”—  
this question that sounds so obtuse is actually a really good question.  
The original text they’ve all been quoting,  
that text from Leviticus that says  
“you shall love your neighbor as yourself,”  
is longer than that. The full statement in Leviticus goes like this:  
“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge  
against any of *your people* [emphasis added],  
but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>5</sup>  
Well, hold on: what’s this “your people” stuff?  
In a world of countless different ethnic groups and tribes,  
are we talking “love *your people*,” love your fellow tribesmembers,  
or are we talking “love *everybody*,” no matter who they are?

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<sup>5</sup> Leviticus 19:8.

## *Who is my neighbor?*

In the lawyer's world, this is a very good question. After all, the historical books of the Jewish Bible are full of God's commands to the Jews to slay their enemies. Just a few verses after the famous command in Deuteronomy to love God with all your mind and strength and heart, we hear God telling the Israelites to destroy the inhabitants of the land they're about to invade: "you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy."<sup>6</sup>

So: who is my neighbor, indeed?  
Is it my group, my special people, or is it *everybody*?  
The Jewish tradition isn't 100% consistent here.  
The older layers of the tradition tell us,  
your neighbor is someone in your group.  
Other people don't count.  
But the prophetic tradition says, *everyone* deserves our justice.  
*Everyone* deserves our love.  
We know what Jesus thinks.  
He's already told us: "I say to you, Love your enemies  
and pray for those who persecute you...  
do good to those who hate you,  
bless those who curse you."<sup>7</sup>  
He is pretty clear that our neighbor is everybody.  
If we want to live,  
if we want to have life abundant, and grace, and peace  
(and every person who has ever lived wants that, including us),  
the way forward is to love our neighbor as we love ourselves,  
and our neighbor is everyone  
and it is all part of loving the one the Jewish people call God.  
This is the message, this is the promise.

The story of the Good Samaritan is how he makes it real for us.

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<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 7:2.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 5:44, Luke 6:27-28.

But all of us still have to do that work for ourselves.  
We have to ask ourselves constantly,  
am I really loving my neighbor?  
Am I blessing those who curse me?  
If I supported health-care reform,  
am I blessing the Tea-Partiers who tried to block it?  
You probably heard about the protesters who shouted racist epithets  
at Representative John Lewis, the civil rights hero,  
and the ones who shouted anti-gay slurs at Barney Frank  
because they were voting for the health-care bill.  
Personally, I was deeply offended when I heard about that.  
It was wrong and shameful.  
But that doesn't mean we get to hate them.  
Each one of us has to ask ourselves  
when we encounter people who seem most unlike us,  
most opposed to us: am I able to love *those* people?  
Am I able to bless *them*  
even as they are cursing what is precious to me?

We *have* to. We really have to,  
if we are going to be able to live with any kind of integrity.  
We have to be able to look at them with love, and bless them,  
and wish them all good things in their life.  
It doesn't mean we have to vote the way they want us to.  
We don't have to abandon our brains or our vision of a just society.  
But we have to love them.  
We have to love them as fellow human beings on this earth,  
struggling just like we are.  
Because if we don't, what are we saying?  
We preach about the inherent worth and dignity of every person,  
we preach that everyone is precious and worthy of love,  
and if it does not extend to the people we are angry with,  
the people who infuriate us,  
even the people who are working to undermine  
everything we stand for—  
if our love is not strong enough to embrace those people too,

it is a pretty cheap sort of love that is not worth my time or yours.

But I know, I *know* the love that we preach is stronger than that. Listen: the Jewish tradition from which Jesus emerged tells us our love for our neighbor flows out of and exists *because* of the first and greatest commandment: to love God.

Now, language can be a barrier, and I want to remind you, as I've often said before, God is a word that the Jewish and Christian traditions use to point to something that is much bigger than any idea we can have about it.

You don't have to "believe in God" to *love God* in the way the Jewish tradition calls us to do.

For me,

to love God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind is to love truth. It is to love integrity, justice, and love itself.

Because "loving," in this case, means putting something first, above all of our other desires and priorities and goals.

When the Jewish teachers tell us to love God first,

I hear them telling us to love integrity, to love truth, to love justice—to rejoice in that which is right and deep and true and joyful.

I hear them telling us to love the reality behind everything, the source of all things,

that which has created everything and everyone.

And if we take that seriously, how can we not love that *everything and everyone* which has been created?

I have a mantra that I use to remind myself

everyone on this earth is a child of that source, just as I am—because I need reminders!

When I'm getting irritated or mad or frustrated with someone, I try to say to myself, "There goes God."

And what I mean by that is,

that person who is irritating me or making me mad or whatever is a manifestation of divine creativity just as I am.

The world is a big place

and there is room for a *lot* of different people in it,  
and not everyone has to agree with me and be like me,  
and *I* don't have to agree with everyone else either,  
but *everybody* deserves my respect and my love.  
To the extent I reject anyone, I am rejecting the very source of life  
without which nothing could exist, least of all me.

But if we truly love that reality which Jesus called God;  
if out of the depths of that love  
we can find within us love for *every* neighbor,  
we are safe.

We are blessed.

There is nothing to fear, not even death,  
for we are already part of the life eternal.

Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem,  
the center, the heart of his people,  
and death was waiting there too, and suffering,  
and it wasn't easy, nobody can promise us it's going to be easy,  
but in the end it's all right,  
it's all right,  
because he had seen the radiance that shines  
out of the depths of the great mystery,  
all barriers swept away,  
all fear dissolved in love,  
infinite love.

This is our Easter; this is our hope.

May there be peace in every heart,  
and compassion, and joy.

Amen.