

Luke 10:25-37: The Good Samaritan

by Rev. John Nordin

Note the structure of the story:

Round I:

Lawyer	Q1	What must I do to inherit eternal life ?
Jesus	Q2	What is written?
Lawyer	A2	You should love...
Jesus	A1	Do this and live...

Round II:

Lawyer	Q3	Who is my neighbor?
Jesus	Q4	...which of these was a neighbor?
Lawyer	A4	The one who showed mercy
Jesus	A3	Go and do likewise.

Some observations

1. The lawyer is full of contradictions:

- ▼ He stands (a sign of respect) but to test (a sign of disrespect)
- ▼ He asks what he must "do" to "inherit." But you don't have to do something to inherit, it is a gift.
- ▼ His life (non-neighborlyness) may be at variance with his theology (which is accurate).
- ▼ He expects the answer to "who is my neighbor" of "my relatives, and my friends." Once he gets this answer, he will be justified, and can bask in the glow of approval.

2. Because the victim is naked and unconscious, passerby cannot identify his class or group by his clothing or speech. Thus, no one can tell what is the "proper" way to deal with him.

3. The Priest is probably riding. This is assumed (cf. Kenneth Bailey, Through Peasant Eyes) because a priest is rich. We assume it also when we say "I'm going to town," and we don't mention our car. This is important for point 7.

4. The Priest's failure to help is not wrong from within his perspective, in the same way our failure to give money to homeless beggars is seen as meritorious: the victim may be a "sinner," the priest risks violating a ritual purity by contact with a non-Jew. Purifying himself would be embarrassing and costly.

5. The Levite knows the priest is ahead of him on the road, and may even have seen the priest pass by. The Levite is not bound by as many restrictions as the priest, but to stop would be to contradict the judgment of the "professional." The Levite may well be walking, and thus fear of the robbers and the difficulty of helping may be factors also.

6. After the Priest, and the Levite, the expected third person would be a layman (who might also have officiated at the temple.) A story about a noble Jew helping a despised Samaritan might have been absorbed more easily. It might feed the prejudice of the crowd for the "professionals."

7. The Samaritan makes up, in reverse order for what the other actors fail to do.
He makes up for the Levite by approaching and giving first aid
for the Priest by using his horse to remove the man to safety
for the robbers by giving the man money

 8. Note the dimensions of religious, or cultic action as done by the Samaritan:
He pours oil and wine (used in the cult). Compare Phil. 2:17: But even if I am being
poured out as a libation ... and Romans 12:1: "present your bodies as a living sacrifice." Perhaps
there is a good image in there. It does heighten the contrast between mere cultic observance and
good worship.

 9. The Samaritan exhibits great courage. As a member of a despised group, the family of the
wounded man could well exact revenge on the Samaritan. Bailey says:
An American cultural equivalent would be a Plains Indian in 1875 walking into
Dodge City with a scalped cowboy on his horse, checking into a room over the
local saloon, and staying the night to take care of him. Any Indian so brave would
be fortunate to get out of the city alive even if he had saved the cowboy's life.
- And Jesus displays great courage by preaching this text to the "cowboys!" Imagine telling Israelis
today about a noble Palestinian, or Turks about a noble Greek or Armenian.
10. Innkeepers had a bad reputation. "Prostitute" is often translated as "woman who keeps an
inn." Thus the pledge to pay the final bill protects the wounded man from retribution by the
innkeeper.

Preaching on the text

Note that the message is not only: "be a neighbor to all."
but "the one you despise is the best neighbor."

The parable calls us not only to acts of service, but to respect the good actions by those people
we have decided are no good.

Perhaps most of us and our audience are most like the Levite, we "go over" to where suffering is
(via TV) but do not do anything.

Of course, it is a common game to "recast" the parable in modern terms. And we have "official"
categories of people to cast as the Samaritan: drug dealers, Blacks, Arabs, homosexuals. In
thinking about this, it occurred to me that the one group of people I have heard the most abuse
directed at over the past year (except for those who don't come to church) are the poor. Over and
over again I hear people talk about the poor as "lazy," saying "they could get a job if they
wanted." And of course, the stories of people on food stamps buying a cut of meat just a bit too
rich, or turn down some menial job, etc. etc., are endless.

Why are we so angry at poor people?

