

A lawyer decided to test Jesus. Maybe he wanted to show him up, or maybe he wanted to make sure Jesus was for real. Is this travelling preacher for real, or is he just another pretender? Well, he's for real, alright. So real he turns the table on the lawyer before he can say *habeas corpus*, and the lawyer is the one being tested to see if he is for real.

By the way, if you're a religious leader in the New Testament as this lawyer is, don't ask Jesus a bunch of questions, especially if you think you can hoodwink him. Jesus will nail you to the sheetrock every time. The lawyer got the ball rolling. He asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus kept the ball rolling, "What do you read, smart man? What's in the law?" Very, very few people could read in those days. If you could read, you were probably formally educated. So Jesus appealed to the lawyer's educated snobbery, if he had any. And the lawyer, all schooled up and wanting to demonstrate his breadth of knowledge, fell right into the trap. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself." To which Jesus replies, "Yes, that's it, scholar. Do that, and you're good."

But the lawyer wasn't satisfied to leave it there. Either he didn't stump Jesus like he wanted to, or the truth of his answer hit him between the eyes, for how daunting the commandment is to

love God and love neighbor. So he came back with another question, hoping to redeem himself. "Yeah, but who is my neighbor?" Perhaps Jesus and he will go a-chasing rabbits now across the fields of speculation, parsing out who deserves to be loved and who doesn't. And by the time their finished debating their positions, the lawyer will have demonstrated his intellectual proficiency and saved face.

Nope. No such luck. The lawyer wants to get philosophical, but Jesus doesn't bite. Instead, in typical Jesus fashion, Jesus tells a parable, a story about a man attacked by robbers and left for dead in the ditch, and the people who come across him as they travelled down the Jericho Road. We didn't ask for this story, but now we have to deal with it. It's a tough one. Might turn your life upside down. Thanks a lot, Mr. Lawyer.

So the man was robbed and beaten, and the first two people who discover him don't stop. Both the priest and the Levite see the man, half-dead, and pass by on the other side. Now why would they do that? I bet at least 50% of us at one time or another have stopped to save something half-dead on the side of the road. People tell me very often, "Well, I saw another puppy while I was driving home, and I couldn't just leave it there." Another puppy? In all my life, I haven't seen even one little puppy beside the road, and some of you see them every other month. You must have the

eyes and heart to see them. And you stop save a life. Last week, missions and outreach put out blessing bags, those plastic bags full of snacks for homeless people we might see while we're in town doing our business. Within an hour, they were almost gone. Apparently, you folks are all over the place. When you come across something half-dead on the street, you help. It seems like the thing to do. So why do the priest and the Levite pass by the injured man in the ditch? They are religious folks like us, after all, people who are supposed to care.

Some claim the priest and the Levite were religious elites, and therefore couldn't be bothered with taking care of wounds and wiping up blood, menial work for such high ranking officials with people to see and places to go. There is little evidence for this claim. Some priests and Levites ranked high in the social order, but most were your average Joes doing the jobs handed down to them through their families. The world has known its fair share of religious snobs, but these fellows probably weren't among them.

Others explain their uncaring behavior by appealing to Jewish law. It's true that Jewish law prohibited touching a corpse. Such acts defiled a person and required at least a week's worth of ritual cleansing. But it's just as true that Jewish law demanded burial. Jews always buried their kin. They even buried strangers, sometimes at great risk to themselves, because nothing was worse

than leaving a person exposed to the elements. Also, consider that long before Jesus came along, Jewish law required love of neighbor. Looking the other way while someone bleeds to death on the other side of the street isn't loving your neighbor.

The more obvious reason for the actions of the Levite and priest is they were afraid. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was dangerous. King David called it the valley of the shadow of death, 18 miles that twisted down through mountains and canyons where thieves and robbers waited to ambush. What might you think if you came across a man left for dead on that trail? You might think, "Dear God, are robbers close by? What if I'm next?" Or, if your antennae were really up, you might wonder if the crime scene was staged. What if thieves covered someone in goat's blood, and were waiting to jump on the next person who stops to help. Fear. Very real fear.

I have a slice of high drama to share with you. One Saturday night, someone at my neighbor's house was stabbed. I know this because at 2:30 a.m. I heard someone banging on our door crying for help because he had been stabbed. Let's just say he got my attention. I did a few things right. I talked to him and found out he wasn't stabbed in the chest, thank goodness, but in the arm. I called 911 and reassured him I wouldn't leave and that an ambulance was on the way. But do you know what I didn't do?

I didn't make myself vulnerable. I didn't open the door or tend to his wounds. You know why I didn't. Picking up a puppy beside the road is one thing. Handing out a blessing bag in public in broad daylight is one thing. Opening the door and sticking out your neck onto the Jericho Road at 2:30 in the morning is another. And I didn't do it.

But here I've gone and made the assumption that all of us seem to make when Jesus tells this parable. And that is that the parable intends for us to identify with the travelers rather than the man in trouble. What would we do if we ran across this fellow? Would we be the Good Samaritan? We assume the parable is first a call for us to do good, even if it's risky.

According to Amy Jill Levine, the first hearers wouldn't have identified with the travelers. They would have identified first with the man left for dead because they dreaded this road and feared for their safety when they had to travel it. You'll notice that Jesus began the parable with a thorough description of the man being attacked, not with the people passing by. So as the parable was told, the horrified audience would have put themselves in the ditch, hoping and praying that someone would come by to help. My, how the story changes when we no longer imagine ourselves as the ones with resources and choices to make, and instead we lie

there powerless, totally dependent on the goodness of others, time slipping away. Imagine you're the one being left for dead.

Then take into account the rule of threes. It's a pretty simple rule. If I say Larry, Moe, then if you're old enough, you would say Curly. If I say red, white, then chances are you would say blue. If someone is telling a joke, a pastor, a priest and a what walk into a bar? The rule of threes says we group things according to like kind: three stooges, three colors, three clerics. So, if we're like the first hearers of the parable, we're disappointed when the priest passes by; and we're even more downhearted when the Levite walks by, but we still have hope because we know there's a third coming. We even know who it will be, a person of like kind, an Israelite, who will want to save us, his neighbor. Inside and outside of scripture, we find stories and tales where these three are linked together: priest, Levite and Israelite. Help is on the way for us! Two may have failed, but another from our own tribe is about to appear!

But as we hear the footsteps approaching, and we look up through our headache to see the face of rescue, it's not an Israelite. It's the face of the enemy, and we couldn't defend ourselves if we had to. Now what?

Samaritans and Jews had long standing hatred for each other. We can't go into all the reasons, but each had legitimate

cause to think of the other as the bad guys. A history of getting even had only made matters worse. Most of the time, Jews and Samaritans handled their hatred by avoiding each other. But now, on the Jericho Road, if the enemy avoids the enemy, someone is going to die. We are going to die.

Put on your rescuer the face of your enemies. It's not our family doctor, our favorite minister or our trusted counselor who has found us in our moment of desperation, but our enemy: the president of the bank that foreclosed on our house when Mom was sick; the business partner that left us hanging; the fellow student who beat us for class president by telling lies about us; the terrorist whose bomb went off; the criminal who took too much of what was important to us. This parable is so distasteful. But as the enemy cleans and wraps our wounds, and the ambulance drives us off to the hospital, we must face a couple of truths. One of these days, our lives might very well depend on the generosity of our enemies; and two, that those we despise, individuals or groups, may still have the capacity for good, that they are still human. Otherwise, we would be dead.

The lawyer asked, "Who is my neighbor?" But Jesus didn't answer. Instead he told a story and asked, "Who was the neighbor?" Again, the lawyer got it right. He said, "I suppose the one who showed mercy." We can say what was too hard for him

to say, "The enemy who showed mercy; he overcame his fear, and acted more like the neighbor." And Jesus said, "Go and do likewise."

I remember a story about a person who decided to do good to his enemies. It didn't turn out so well. They accused him of a crime and got him convicted. They tortured him for several hours. Then they nailed him to a cross. His enemies didn't know it, but they were the weak ones. He was the strong one. And when he rose out of the grave, he broke the power of their hatred. He still lives, the friend of his enemies. And any who reach out to him as he has reached out to us have their wounds bound and their crimes forgiven. Otherwise, we're dead.

It's this Jesus who tells us to go and do likewise. And being neighbor to our enemy may be more possible than we think. You may remember this story from the Civil Rights Era, when protest had prompted counter protest somewhere in Alabama, I believe. In the midst of the chaos, several African American men had cornered a white supremacist, and were beating him to pieces. A young black woman at the protest – wish I remembered her name – saw this. She ran to the scene and threw herself on top of the man they were beating. They men came to their senses and stopped the beating. She might very well have saved the white man's life. Of course, I want to identify with the young black



woman, but I know better. Saved by an enemy, that's us. Now go and do likewise.

I can't say I love this parable, but I need it. It grounds my caring in the love shown to me by another; and it puts a human face on all those I would demonize. Someone was a good enemy for you. Go and do likewise. Someone put his life at risk for you. Go and do likewise. Who was the neighbor? The one who showed mercy to us when there were plenty of good reasons not to. Go and do likewise.