

Luke 10:25-37

The expert in Jewish law tests Jesus' expertise with a question about how to inherit eternal life—how to become an heir in God's family. Jesus answers at first with two questions: What is written in the law? And what do you read there? The lawyer answers the first question. "What is written in the law" is loving God whole-heartedly and loving neighbor as oneself. But he doesn't tell Jesus how he *reads* that law. And you know, that is the other half of it. Texts are written, and there they sit on the page. But they do not live until someone reads them, and we always, always read them through our own filters and with respect to our own experiences. The lawyer knows what is written in the law perfectly well. But he wants to know how *Jesus* reads the law. And Jesus obliges with a parable that of course has context.

Here's some of the context: Toward the end of Chapter 9, so shortly before this story, Jesus and his disciples had passed through a Samaritan village. The villagers refused them hospitality, so James and John (perhaps intoxicated with the recent experience of having successfully cast out demons) offer to Jesus to command fire to come down from heaven and consume the villagers. This is what God had done to Sodom after they had violated the rules of hospitality to Lot and his entourage; clearly James and John are interpreting scripture and experience in a very understandable way. But Jesus had turned and rebuked those disciples, so they just went on.

Jesus tells this parable that we all know so well, and he makes the hero a Samaritan, no doubt causing gnashing of teeth among his disciples. In her excellent book *Short Stories by Jesus*, Amy-Jill Levine dispatches a lot of the stereotypes of first-century Judaism that suggest that the priest and Levite were afraid of ritual contamination, or that Samaritans were outcasts

or of low status. She mentions the incident in Luke 9, and also a longer story from Chronicles in which the “people of Israel” (meaning the Northern Kingdom, meaning Samaritans) captured 200K Judean women and children and planned to enslave them. A prophet chastised them in the name of God, and the upshot was that they took the captives and clothed them, gave them sandals, provided them with food and drink, and anointed them; and carrying all the feeble among them on donkeys, they brought them home and then went back to Samaria. It’s like a preview of the parable, and both stories are some tough love from our religious heritage. They’re challenging.

As Levine points out about the story from Chronicles, the cycle of violence can be broken. The Samaritans in that story reversed course and made their captives whole again. But also, those who want to kill you may be the only ones who will save you. To hear the parable today, she suggests, simply update the identity of the figures.

I am an Israeli Jew, . . . left half dead in a ditch. Two people who should have stopped to help pass me by: the first, a Jewish medic from the Israel Defense Forces; the second, a member of the Israel/Palestine Mission Network of the Presbyterian Church USA. But the person who takes compassion on me and shows me mercy is a Palestinian Muslim whose sympathies lie with Hamas, a political party whose charter not only anticipates Israel’s destruction, but also depicts Jews as subhuman demons responsible for all the world’s problems.

. . . Can we finally agree that it is better to acknowledge the humanity and the potential to do good in the enemy, rather than to choose death?ⁱ

Well. Easier said than done, my good scholarly friend. But that’s why Jesus told the story. So we’d think about how to do it, how to break the cycle of violence . . . and how to find the humanity in our enemies.

I recently listened to a podcast by the third generation of a family that’s suffered enormous dysfunction.ⁱⁱ I don’t want to go into details because we’ll all be so horrified we

won't be able to think about Jesus. But I bring it up because the two women in the third generation managed to get the second-generation survivors together to talk, to unseal old festering secrets, and essentially to heal their family. Some of that conversation was in the podcast. Those people were victims, but of course in family systems victims can also do victimizing, so there are a lot of feelings to cope with. And what I heard was people speaking about their pain, not blaming the others but also not pretending the others hadn't had a role. I heard people acknowledging that they'd hurt one another, explaining but not excusing, and apologizing. It was a little uncanny, actually; I can only imagine they'd all gotten a lot of therapy to get them to the point of being able to have this conversation. But what I found so powerful, and why I bring it up, is that they all wanted so much to *have* a family that they were willing to do this painful work. Although their lived experience of family was horrific, they knew there was a better version of that, and that it was life-giving. So they engaged – but the healing had to come from those who had been part of the hurt.

I am not saying that survivors of domestic abuse should necessarily engage with their abusers. I've simplified the story quite a bit, and trust me, the primary abusers could not have been part of this conversation. What I am struck by, thanks to Amy-Jill Levine, and what I'm trying to think about here, is how enmeshed we really, actually, truly are all with one another, and how difficult it can be to see that reality. When Jesus answers the lawyer's question about how to be an heir to God's family, he lays out not a single good deed but a way of life: we have to walk around seeing a neighbor in *everyone*. And acting mercifully *all the time*. That is what life in God's family looks like. "Eternal life" is not a reward for good behavior, like a trip to the Bahamas for doing good work; the reward is in seeing one's neighbors as neighbors. This family

won't be rewarded for their hard work with a shiny new family; they're *doing* family right now by sticking with each other as their hard stories get told, listening as long as it takes, and taking responsibility for their parts in the story.

Let me close with this terrific folk tale from Burma, which speaks to our enmeshment, our necessary involvement with one another.ⁱⁱⁱ

Long ago a traveler was walking through the jungles of Burma when he came upon a small village. As the sun was going down, he decided to just sleep along the roadside and enter the village in the morning. Taking his coin purse from around his neck, he found a stone nearby and hid his purse so no one would take it as he slept. As it turned out, a villager had spotted him hiding the purse. Late at night as the traveler slept, the villager returned and stole the purse. When the traveler awoke, the money was gone. The traveler sat down beside the road and began to weep. A crowd began to gather, curious about this traveler weeping on the edge of the village. Before long the mayor joined the crowd and inquired about the situation. He listened to the traveler and then asked to see the stone. The traveler walked a short distance to a round stone about the size of a man's head.

The mayor ordered, "Arrest that stone. Bring that thief to the town square where I'll convene a court." The villagers followed the mayor and the traveler to the town square. Once the village elders were in place, the mayor convened the court. The mayor asked the stone, "What is your name?" The stone was silent.

The mayor leaned forward closer to the stone and demanded, "Where did you come from?" More silence. "Well at least tell me your age." By this time some of the villagers were casting glances at each other. Small smiles and puzzled looks were on the faces of the villagers.

The mayor pushed his face closer to the stone. "So, you don't want to speak up? Tell me, why were you loitering outside our village?" The villagers began to cover their mouths to muffle their laughter. "So, were you looking for trouble?" Some of the villagers could not contain themselves any longer; they let out a laugh. The mayor turned to the crowd and declared, "Show some respect. This is a court of law."

The mayor turned back to the stone. "You will not answer my questions, so I hold you in contempt of court. In punishment, you will receive thirty lashes with a stick." The crowd could no longer contain themselves. They let out uproarious laughter. The mayor turned to the crowd, "Have you no respect for this court? I fine every one of you a coin a piece," One by one the villagers came forward and dropped a coin in a bowl in front of the mayor. The mayor then gave the coins to the traveler and apologized for the crime that had been committed outside of the village. The traveler's eyes filled with tears, for what he had lost had been restored.

The mayor wished the traveler well and ordered the stone to be returned to the place where it was found. Every time the villagers walk past the stone, they are reminded that they share the burdens of one another and all who pass their way. Every time we hear the story of the good Samaritan, we are reminded that it is possible to break the cycle of violence, and that our enemies hold the potential to become friends.

Let us pray: God, whose family is larger than all imagining, you know how hard it can be to see others as our kin. You know how sometimes each of us turns away from a neighbor in need, feeling overwhelmed or helpless or resentful. Help us grow toward that state in which we enjoy and look forward to helping another, because it is the stuff of life in your realm.

ⁱ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*. New York: Harper Collins, p. 115.

ⁱⁱ <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/root-of-evil-the-true-story-of-the/id1450277129>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003eca/view>