

Us vs Them
Luke 10:25-37
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On Wednesday morning I was in the midst of reading commentaries on this passage, with a tall stack of books still to get through on my desk. I was enjoying the insights I was learning about this parable and was prepared for hours more study, when I recalled that I had really liked a blog post I had read some months ago on this parable. So, I looked for where I had saved it on my computer. I found it and re-read it and realized that it said everything that I wanted to preach this morning.

So, I'm going to do something I've only done two or three times in my preaching life, I'm going to proclaim, at length, someone else's words. This reflection on the Parable of the Good Samaritan was written by David R. Henson for the Patheos blog. He is an Episcopal deacon and a graduate of the Graduate Theological Union.

Jesus doesn't really want you to be the good Samaritan.

At least, that's not the point of his story in this week's Gospel. Unfortunately, when Christians hear this story, we think Jesus is asking us to be the unlikely do-gooders in the world who bind wounds of strangers, pay medical bills of distant neighbors, and offer unexpected compassion to the beaten and wounded traveler. In short, we have understood this parable as a call to boundary-crossing charity, and we are to be the charitable ones.

[As the world's wealthy and powerful, we also assume we are the world's teachers and saviors. We believe this parable wants us to condescend to the broken and poor in order to save them. We believe we are the Samaritans and that their salvation lies with us. It is a troubling assumption of the privileged.]

As a result, we have transformed this subversive story into little more than a mushy morality tale about random acts of kindness to strangers that, at its worst, buttresses the damaging and pervasive charity-industrial complex in American churches. We have whitewashed this radical parable into a fantasy of the privileged and wealthy in which we believe Christ calls us only to apply bandages, throw money at the pain and injustice in the world, and trust it is enough.

In this light, this parable not only justifies but also glorifies drive-by charity as the pinnacle of Christ's command to love thy neighbor. Because in this story, we think Jesus is encouraging us to be like the Samaritan. But he is not.

Jesus, in this parable, isn't asking us to go and do likewise so that we can be charitable like the Samaritan. His point is much more subtle. Of course, we are to bind the wounds of the wounded. Of course, we are to take care of the oppressed and the downtrodden. We all know this to be what God asks of us. Works of charity and mercy are a given in the life of faith.

Even the lawyer in the story knows this without a second thought. So, no, I don't think the point of this parable is for us to be do-gooders.

Instead, when Jesus tells the lawyer to go and do likewise, he is asking the lawyer to go and imitate the Samaritan, his cultural enemy. He is asking the educated lawyer to sit at the feet of the Other in order to learn the way of salvation. He is asking this myopic man to see the people he despises most are the very people who hold for him the key to eternal life.

"Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" the lawyer asks.

"See your enemy as your teacher," Jesus replies through this parable.

Jesus doesn't want us to be the Good Samaritans. Rather, Jesus wants us to know who the Samaritans are in our own lives. Then, he asks us to do the hard work of seeing them as humans not as Others, as teachers not as our students, as the heroes who offer us salvation rather than the victims who need our saving help.

How horrifying must it have been for the studied lawyer to have no choice but to admit that the dog — the Samaritan — was the answer both to Jesus' question and to his own original question about his own salvation. Notice, the man cannot even bring himself to utter that distasteful word "Samaritan," preferring instead to hold his nose and say, "the one who showed him mercy."

He had begun by addressing Jesus as the teacher. Jesus redirected the lawyer to his enemy as his true teacher, that is, if the man honestly wanted to learn what it meant to live an eternal life. But the lawyer could not even bring himself to acknowledge the one who showed mercy was indeed a Samaritan.

Now, we all have our own cultural enemies, and we all have our derogatory names for them. They are slurs based on race, on sexuality, on class, on political preference (and progressives, let's not forget our favorites like "redneck" and "right-wing nut job"). The parable of the Samaritan asks us to confess first that we have these cultural enemies — be it an undocumented immigrant, a gay person, a poor person, a rural gun rights-advocate, or a staunch Republican. Then, it asks us to see that our salvation lies in loving these enemies enough to be willing to learn something from them.

The problem is we don't want to learn from our enemies. We don't want them to be

our teachers. Because, if we are willing to learn from them, if we are willing to take the time to listen to their stories, then it will become difficult to demonize them, to blame them for all that ails our country and our own lives, to rage at them from afar. . . .

But then, what in the world will we do with our own and our world's woundedness when we have no one to blame for them?

Perhaps at that moment, we will find ourselves in this story. . . .

We are each the beaten one on the roadside, in need of salvation from our enemies.

We are each the Samaritan, with the power to save our enemies by loving them.

In other words, this parable asks us to do the unthinkable.

It asks us to heal and to be healed by our enemies, our neighbors, our sisters and brothers.

It asks us to live an eternal life today.

It asks us to live on earth as it is in heaven.