

On Being a Neighbor

Amos 7:7-17

Luke 10:25-37

“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

Where to begin with this overly familiar parable? Begin with the lawyer who begins with the wrong question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” he asks Jesus. It is a question we all have learned to ask in a society that teaches us to believe we can achieve the good life if we work hard enough, if we earn our way. It is a question most students ask teachers in high school: how many pages do I have to write to get a good grade? It is a question children ask parents or parents ask children: what exactly do I have to do to be loved enough? “The lawyer is thinking of something to check off his to-do list,” Amy-Jill Levine says. “Recite a prayer, offer a sacrifice, drop off a box of macaroni for a food drive, put a twenty in the collection plate....The question presumes eternal life is a commodity to be inherited or purchased on the basis of a particular action rather than a gift freely given.”

Jesus initially plays along with the lawyer and engages him in what appears to be a typical first century rabbinic conversation. But James Alison, a former Dominican priest and a most remarkable reader of texts, warns us that, instead, “we are about to embark on a discussion of what it looks like to become an insider in the life of God.” “What is written in the law?” Jesus asks. “How do you read?” He wants to know not only where the lawyer would go in Torah to answer his own question, but also how he would interpret the meaning of his chosen text. In Good Presbyterian fashion, the lawyer cites two laws meant to interpret Scripture by Scripture. From Deuteronomy: love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might; and from Leviticus: love your neighbor as yourself. Alison translates his answer to say that “What it looks like to be on the inside of the life of God is to be stretched towards God with every faculty of your being, and the form this takes is being stretched towards your neighbor.”

Jesus agrees and basically ends the conversation. But the lawyer needs more from Jesus because the text in Leviticus about the neighbor is a bit fuzzy. Initially Leviticus defines “neighbor” as “the sons of your own people”—sort of like the Constitution of the United States initially defined “citizen” as land-owning white men. But then God’s truth goes marching on. The next few verses read: “When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God.” Or the better translation, truly, is: “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you. You shall love the alien as yourself.” This time Scripture has interpreted Scripture not to the lawyer’s liking. Leviticus seems to be saying that the meaning of “neighbor” is universal, which renders it meaningless legally. That is, if one among us today is quaking at the prospect of receiving a knock on the door from ICE, all of us should be worried about being sent back to wherever Ancestry.com says we came from. Therefore the lawyer is hoping Jesus might narrow the interpretation of “neighbor” to a reasonable law that can be followed and enforced. He asks, “Who is my neighbor?” which is a polite way, Amy-Jill says, of asking, “Who is *not* my neighbor?” or ‘Who does not deserve my love?’ or ‘Whose lack of food or shelter can I ignore?’ or ‘Whom can I (for all intents and purposes) hate?’”

“You’re on,” Jesus says. “Let’s see where this takes us” and begins to tell a story that holds in solution “what it is like to be on the inside of the life of God.” “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho.” A man with no defining characteristics--wasn’t wearing a hoodie, skin not particularly dark, not walking like a sissy—a man was going down what everyone knew to be a road where death-dealing robbers lurked. Think: a desert road where skeletons of men and women and children are regularly found, where people fleeing from God only knows what are dying for want of water. I imagine the people listening in on the conversation, just as we are, thinking, “This guy deserves what he gets for stupidly setting out on that road.” Sure enough, like people on dangerous roads today all over the world, he gets robbed and beaten by men who were not keepers of the law in Leviticus, who were indiscriminate in their harm of the stranger.

“Now by *chance*,” Jesus goes on, also translated “*by coincidence*.” The word always stops me in my tracks and causes me to think about the chances I take and the chances I refuse. It suggests that with each random encounter, God presents us with a chance to be human, a chance to find ourselves on the inside of the life of God. “When you encounter another person,” John Ames says in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*, “when you have dealings with anyone at all, it is as if a question is being put to you. So you must think, ‘What is the Lord asking of me in this moment, in this situation?’ if you think, as it were, ‘This is an emissary sent from the Lord,’ and some benefit is intended for me,

first of all the occasion to demonstrate my faithfulness, [and second] the chance to show that I do in some small degree participate in the grace that saved me....”

The priest and the Levite miss the chance and we do not know why each decides to “pass by on the other side.” Martin Luther King, Jr. imagined the reason might have been fear. “‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ ...But then the...Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’ ‘If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?’ King stopped in Memphis and was murdered for the chance he took. I confess that this is the moment in the parable when I think of the multitude of chance encounters with people living on the street I have avoided when walking purposefully down Walnut or when making a right turn to get on the Schuylkill from JFK Boulevard. My reading of Jesus’ teachings have indeed trumped my nation’s teachings when it comes to how my conscience has been formed if not my actions. But stopping here for the story’s meaning, with us potentially in the hero’s roll, seems to be returning us to the ordinary reading of the parable that we disavowed a few minutes ago. As Steve Garnaas-Holmes puts it, “Good or not, you have too much privilege to be a Samaritan.”

Enter, then, the Samaritan. This hated, outside “other,” this “foreigner” to the lawyer, this “immigrant” to us, draws near to the half-dead man and, getting close enough to see, he is “moved with pity.” Actually the word means he was “gut-wrenched.” You know how your intestines feel when you see a scene that makes you want to throw up your toenails? Curious, isn’t it, what moves each of us in this way these days—a sort of partisan Rorschach test. But in the world of the parable, the word used to describe the Samaritan’s motive for tending the man by the side of the road is the Greek form of a word used to describe God’s entrails. *God’s insides* burst forth from the Samaritan and he acts to do everything humanly possible to make the man whole.

Now Jesus asks: “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” That is to say, in response to the lawyer’s question that presumed “a passive object of mandated benevolence (Who is my neighbor?), Jesus questions the lawyer concerning the one who was “the active creator of neighborliness. A further hint,” Alison says, “that [Jesus] is answering the question, ‘what is it like to be on the inside of the life of God?’” The lawyer could not bring himself to say the word Samaritan, so instead he simply says, “The man who showed him mercy.” Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.” Period.

“In other words,” Alison concludes, “if you want to inherit the life of God, there is no safely circumscribed definition of who your neighbor is, there is merely finding yourself swept up into the inside of an infinitely attentive creation of neighborliness amidst all the” victims the world leaves half-dead by the side of any given road. But there is one more thing to notice about the Samaritan, Alison insists. “...it seems that part of this gut wrench which he is undergoing is sensed as a tremendous privilege. He is finding himself on the inside of the life of God! So he is quite unconcerned about sensible limits to goodness. He is just delighted to find himself on the inside of this adventure. He doesn’t try to palm off the wounded one on the innkeeper. He seems to realize that he’s found a centre to his life and activity that is worth sticking with. Rather than saying, ‘How little can I get away with and still be a decent person?’ ...he seems to realize that he is being given something good by sharing the life of this victim....[He] owns the situation—makes it his own.”

Of course the one who alone shares the life of this victim, as well as the lives of the children and women and men in so-called detention on our southern border, as well as those waiting to hear a knock on the door before the sun sets today, the one who owns the situation and makes it his own is neither the Samaritan nor the lawyer seeking to justify himself. It is the one telling the story. Of God’s mercy, Karl Barth writes: “[God] ...interposes himself for [us], he gives himself to [us]...he puts himself in [our] place...he makes [our] state and fate his own cause, so that it is no longer [ours] but his....”

As friend and seminary professor Paul Hooker reminded me in a Facebook post this week: “WE are the beaten man, we are the ones in need of mercy and love, not the ones who get to decide whether and to whom to dispense it. It is, in other words, a parable about grace and it reminds us that we don’t get to determine who our neighbors are, but only to receive the grace they, in the name of love, offer us in the moment of our extremity.” This is such a moment, I do believe, in our personal lives and in our life as a nation. Steve Garnaas-Holmes has put matter more pointedly: “You’re the one in the ditch. Your neighbor is the other one. You call them rapists and they pick your fruit. You call them shiftless and dangerous and they build your economy. You abhor them and they bless you. Stop making it about you. Confess your dependence. Receive your neighbor’s grace. Be humbly grateful. Let yourself be [the] neighbor.” In this mean time, may the one telling the story have mercy on us. Amen.