

**THE UNEXPECTED, UNWANTED GOD; LUKE 10:25-37; JULY 10/17, 2016;
THOMAS H. YORTY; HOLLOWAY CHAPEL AND WESTMINSTER**

The first thing that needs to be said about the parable of the Good Samaritan – reputed to be the most familiar story in the bible – is that its familiarity is a problem.

What new idea or insight can we possibly gain from this all too familiar tale? Indeed, we have made a secular saint out of the Samaritan – not even referred to as good in the story; hospitals, helping groups, civic awards are named after him, with little attention to who he is or why Luke gives us this account.

To be a ‘good Samaritan’ is synonymous with lending a helping hand: once a week at the local soup kitchen, signing-up at Christmas to see that the food baskets get delivered, sacrificing several Saturdays to work with Habitat for Humanity – all good and worthy deeds; but pretty much business-as-usual community volunteerism. Lifting the Samaritan out of context and making him a symbol for doing good is not who he is or what Jesus had in mind when he told the story.¹

Taking the bite in this way out of Jesus’ parables and avoiding the shocking, threatening challenges they embody is to domesticate the gospel, dull its two-edged sword and perpetuate a status quo resistant to God’s vision for the human family.

There’s nothing wrong with domesticating animals, dangerous people or unruly traditions but shame on us if we water down the tale of the Samaritan.

This story and Jesus’ conversation with the lawyer is aimed at shaking us out of our spiritual doldrums and getting us beyond our limited expectations to a deeper awareness of God’s intention for human life.

The verses preceding today’s frame the parable. Jesus announces that he is setting his face to go to Jerusalem where he will suffer and die; he talks about how difficult it is to follow him after three would-be followers claim their allegiance but delay joining his movement because, they say, they have more important things to do first.

Jesus then sends out seventy of his followers into the towns and villages; he tells them the Spirit will give them power over Satan, he says their work will be dangerous and that they will be like lambs among wolves.

We’re starting to get the picture. There is a struggle between good and evil. Jesus rallies the troops as he makes his final push into the heart of darkness. After more killings of unarmed black men and an attack on police officers in Dallas two weeks ago, the LGBT mass shooting in Orlando, the rampage in Nice on Friday, a coup d’etat attempt in Turkey and our own toxic presidential campaign we shouldn’t have any trouble identifying with the battle Jesus waged. Dante and Milton both said the Bible is the epic narrative of a cosmic war between God and Satan – it would appear that Satan is winning the war. Two comments these past days stand out: the Attorney General said, “We must take care lest this new violence is accepted as the new normal” and Valerie Kuhr, a Sikh leader, said, “What we do after Dallas, makes all the difference: either we can choose fear and hate or grief and love.”

And we can probe the meaning of this parable from Luke.

Apropos of campaign rhetoric that is code for the racial and religious bigotry that floods the social media, sows the seeds of hate and violence and was trumpeted by the GOP candidate and his advisors yesterday including his choice for Vice President, or the anti-Semitic image of Hillary Clinton from a white supremacist website posted by Mr. Trump recently – apropos of all this, is the lawyer’s question to Jesus that assumes but seeks to disguise the privilege and power upon which prejudice is based and designed to protect.

Yet, Jesus’ answer explodes our attempts to confine God’s love to theological or social formulas that favor one group over another.

Luke’s story is a wake up call. Though the lawyer’s question of eternal life appears in the other gospels, Luke’s is the only one where the Good Samaritan is found.

The story is a carefully constructed symmetry of two men asking two questions and agreeing to two answers. The questions and answers are of paramount importance. The lawyer knows the answers to his own questions and in both cases Jesus expresses full agreement.

What could possibly be wrong with this conversation? We have two good questions, two good answers and two men who agree.

In fact, all kinds of things are wrong. The lawyer, an expert in Hebraic law, wants to know which laws, above all laws, must he adhere to. The man is an expert in the law. He knows full well the answer to his own question. Apparently, he just wants to see if Jesus knows the answer.

The question and the answer are of no spiritual or eternal significance to him. What does matter is that he prove his own standing with Jesus or, more likely, given the undermining role of establishment figures in Luke’s gospel, the man is on a mission to damage Jesus’ credibility.

I remember when I was a first year graduate student and invited to a reception for new students – a professor from whom I was taking a course and rising star in his field – the history of science – was also at the party. Like the lawyer, wanting to justify myself, I asked a long, complicated question, not for the answer, but to prove myself.

There were plenty of potholes to fall into but the professor, with whom I became good friends, had a response for me almost as good as Jesus’ reply to the lawyer.

He smiled and asked, “Would you like me to answer that question jumping on one foot with both hands tied behind my back or just one hand?” Then he proceeded to give a short, succinct answer that incorporated all of what I thought were my very insightful points.

Jesus avoids the lawyer’s trap by having him answer his own question. But to justify himself the lawyer asks a follow-up question to his own answer: Who is my neighbor? It mimics a reasonable question from a legal scholar to a rabbi; but the lawyer is looking for a simple checklist of things he can do that won’t cost him much; a formula by which he can live his life, look good and win God’s approval.

And this is where things get interesting. Jesus turns the tables and opens up a place where our racial and religious stereotypes are stripped away and God can reach us.

The answer the lawyer gets is not the one he wants, but the one he needs; it is the answer *we need* if our world isn't going to go up in flames and human existence wiped from the face of the earth. You remember the tale:

A man lay dying on the road to Jericho; a winding road through hills with sharp turns around which bandits lurked to prey upon travelers. This is the road Psalm 121 refers to, "When I lift up my eyes unto the hills from whence cometh by help, my help cometh from the Lord."

The first person to appear coming down the road is a priest.ⁱⁱ The crowd perks up, but the priest, rather than helping passes by on the other side. The crowd loves it, "we're sick and tired of those money-hungry, holy roller preachers." The mob, in Luke, is always anticlerical.

The next person to appear is a Levite – a lay reader from First Presbyterian Church, Jerusalem. He passes by on the other side as well. The crowd is primed. "Those Levites who sit in the first pew every Sunday and tithe think they are better than everyone else. More power to you Jesus!"

Then the man who was robbed, growing delirious and with blurred vision because of loss of blood, hears the footsteps of someone coming toward him. It is his last chance, he thinks. The sun beats down. He opens his eyes and sees a sincere, religious but not showy, ordinary church-goer like you. No, just kidding, he sees a Samaritan!

"Not a Samaritan!" the crowd protests. "We hate the Samaritans; racial mixers, heretics, Roman collaborators! Anyone but a Samaritan! We would swim to the other side of the Jordan to avoid meeting a Samaritan on the road."

We have been following Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem these past weeks; perhaps you remember how James and John, only three weeks ago, wanted Jesus to call down fire from heaven and incinerate a Samaritan village that refused hospitality to Jesus. Samaritans were despised.

But do you recall what the Samaritan does? He rips up his Ralph Lauren suit, bandages the bleeding man, puts him in the back of his new Buick takes him to an inn, pays for the man's stay and says to the innkeeper he'll be back to pick up anything else the man puts on the tab.

We can't blame the priest and Levite; they're busy people probably on their way to a board meeting of the United Way or to serve communion in the local nursing home.

Besides the man laying in the road could be a plant by the robbers; I remember passing a man on an Interstate, sitting in the open gate of his SUV, waving cars toward himself. I thought he was crazy to think anyone would stop.

Jesus then asks the lawyer, "Think carefully, my friend, which one was a neighbor to the man on the road?" The lawyer now realizes he's been caught in the snare of holy love, "Wait a minute Jesus, I asked who is my neighbor *whom I should love* as the great commandment instructs, not *who is a neighbor to me.*"

The lawyer is faced with either confronting and changing his opinion about his enemy – the Samaritans – or rejecting a merciful act that fulfills the great commandment to which he claims ultimate obedience.

Jesus reverses the lawyer's question and in doing so puts the lawyer in what the writer Richard Rohr calls sacred space, the liminal realm, from the Latin "limen" meaning "threshold." This is the infamous "thin place" of the Celts where we encounter the holy one, where God changes human hearts.

This is the realm where we break free of our locked down lives, bolted into routine and business as usual, slogging through the days and years regardless of the cost, ignoring issues that suffocate spontaneity, sap energy and accommodate harsh opinions about our selves and others. This is where God can get to us because our false certitudes that buttress our harsh opinions and easy prejudices are lifted and we can see what life looks like without them, then let them go.

We don't know what the lawyer did after he answered Jesus' question, "Which was a neighbor?" and replied, "The one who showed mercy." We don't know what he did.

Perhaps that's how Luke wants it. He wants us to put ourselves in the shoes of the lawyer; to confront the possibility of our enemy, whomever that may be, coming to be a neighbor to us; to care for us in our time of deep need; to sacrifice for us. Luke leaves the lawyer's and our fate open-ended.

Richard Rohr says when we allow ourselves to be drawn out of "business as usual" into the holy place with our old world left behind, this is where something new can be born.

And this, Jesus' parable is, at last, the gospel in miniature; a tiny nesting doll within the larger gospel; the Samaritan, of course, is Jesus, the unwanted one who comes to save us. Like Jesus' other parables, this is a story *not about us* and what resourceful, gifted people we are and how to show a little hospitality to someone less fortunate.

This is a story about a God whom we didn't expect or want to save us, but who does save us through people we can't stand; not how we save ourselves.

And it is a story not about *to whom we are to be neighbors* but *who is a neighbor to us*; who is that Other coming toward me, whom I fear or despise who might save me if I risk embrace.

Three people – a priest who looks like me, a Levite who looks like you; and the third – an anti-gun legislation NRA member, a homophobic despiser of LGBT people, or maybe even this: a presumptive candidate for President. ⁱⁱⁱ

Fill in whomever it is you most fear and despise. Some Samaritan. This is a story about how God uses the very thing we detest to disarm our bigotry and xenophobia and inoculate us against spiritually lethal attitudes, prejudices and behavior toward other people.

Jesus is the one who eats with sinners, welcomes prodigal sons, adulterous women, and admits thieves to heaven. The despised one is, finally, Jesus himself. We are the one dying in the ditch, proud and alone until he comes with his extravagant love and generosity. Amen.

ⁱ William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, July-September, 2016.

ⁱⁱ I am indebted to Willimon for this format for telling the parable.

ⁱⁱⁱ Again in the spirit of Willimon.