

It's interesting that it's a lawyer's question that trigger's Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan.

This lawyer was, in particular, a specialist in the Mosaic law. His day job was to interpret the law of Moses, which included the ten commandments, but also the other laws that come from the holiness code in the book of Leviticus. And the text tells us that it's his intent to trap Jesus with his question. He's hoping to catch Jesus out on some fine point of the law that maybe Jesus won't understand quite as well as he does.

But being a good teacher, Jesus answers a question with a question. "What's written in the law? And how do you read it?"

And the man gives a very faithful Jewish answer, quoting both Deuteronomy and Leviticus. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

And Jesus gives him a gold star. "That's it, you got it. That's the right answer."

But the lawyer, in much the way we all do, doesn't stop there. The text tells us that he wants to justify himself. He wants to be sure that the neighborly love he is engaged in is going to get the job done as far as this salvation business is concerned. He wants to calculate, and create boundaries and set limits to his responsibility.

The word in the Greek for neighbor is the same word that's used for near. It seems likely that the understanding of who his neighbor is relates to who is near. Now that could be near in terms of geography. Neighbors are those who live in my town, or in my development, or on my block, or, has become the case so much in our world today,

those who live in the houses immediately around our own houses. But near could also mean those near in terms of religious beliefs or racial and ethnic connections; it could be economic status or social standing.

The lawyer probably had a number of ways of understanding who was near to him, who was his neighbor. What he's likely asking Jesus is to confirm what he already believes to be true.

But in his usual fashion, Jesus doesn't give a straight answer. Instead he tells a story. A story that most of us have heard many times in our lives.

"A certain man was going down from Jerusalem into Jericho and fell among thieves who robbed him, beat him and left him half dead."

I learned that this well known story was one that Martin Luther King Jr. used in the last speech he gave in Memphis while he was supporting the sanitation workers who were on strike there.

Now in his speech, Martin Luther King gives thought to the motivation of the priest and Levite who pass by the fallen man on the opposite side of the road. Let me share his words with you, if I may be so bold:

"You remember that a Levite and a priest passed by on the other side. They didn't stop to help him. And finally a man of another race came by. He got down from his beast, decided not to be compassionate by proxy. But he got down with him, administered first aid, and helped the man in need. Jesus ended up saying, this was the good man, this was the great man, because he had the capacity to project the "I" into the "thou," and to be concerned about his brother.

Now you know, we use our imagination a great deal to try to determine why the priest and the Levite didn't stop. At times we say they were busy

going to a church meeting, an ecclesiastical gathering, and they had to get on down to Jerusalem so they wouldn't be late for their meeting. At other times we would speculate that there was a religious law that "One who was engaged in religious ceremonials was not to touch a human body twenty-four hours before the ceremony." And every now and then we begin to wonder whether maybe they were not going down to Jerusalem -- or down to Jericho, rather to organize a "Jericho Road Improvement Association." That's a possibility. Maybe they felt that it was better to deal with the problem from the causal root, rather than to get bogged down with an individual effect.

But I'm going to tell you what my imagination tells me. It's possible that those men were afraid. You see, the Jericho road is a dangerous road. I remember when Mrs. King and I were first in Jerusalem. We rented a car and drove from Jerusalem down to Jericho. And as soon as we got on that road, I said to my wife, "I can see why Jesus used this as the setting for his parable." It's a winding, meandering road. It's really conducive for ambushing. You start out in Jerusalem, which is about 1200 feet above sea level. And by the time you get down to Jericho, fifteen or twenty minutes later, you're about 2200 feet below sea level. That's a dangerous road. In the days of Jesus it came to be known as the "Bloody Pass." And you know, it's possible that the priest and the Levite looked over that man on the ground and wondered if the robbers were still around. Or it's possible that they felt that the man on the ground was merely faking. And he was acting like he had been robbed and hurt, in order to seize them over there, lure them there for quick and easy seizure. And so the first question that the priest asked -- the first question that the Levite asked was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But then the Good Samaritan came by. And he

reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"

"If I stop and help this man, what will happen to me?" That's not a bad calculation and certainly there are times when it's appropriate to set limits for our own safety. I don't pick up hitchhikers and I'm not likely to start. We need to be careful about that risk we put ourselves in and we certainly don't want to be taken advantage of, right...? It's not a bad calculation.

"If I do not stop and help this man, what will happen to him?" That's a better calculation. Making decisions about the reach of our responsibility based on the needs of others rather than based on our own, all too often, selfish concerns. And the more we focus on the needs of others, the easier it is to see the needs of others, in all kinds of situations. When we become accustomed to looking for, seeing and helping those who are struggling, we suddenly see struggle in places where we never saw it before.

But I want to take us a little bit farther. Martin Luther King wanted to persuade his audience to support the sanitation workers in their strike, but I believe Jesus wants to do more in his telling of this story to the lawyer and those around them.

So let's move away from the motivation of the lawyer. And let's move away from the imagined motivations of the priest and the Levite. And let's even move away from the motivation of the Samaritan. Let's instead put ourselves in the shoes—or rather—the ditch since he has no shoes-- of the man who has been robbed, beaten and left half dead.

I imagine that he's not thinking of who his neighbor is, and he's not running through quick calculations of near and not near in his head and he's not thinking about who might or might not have responsibility for his beaten and near dead body lying there

by the side of the road. He's been stripped bare of everything, his money, his clothing, his dignity, any control he thought he had and almost his life. He's got nothing. He needs everything, and he's not going to make any distinctions about who his helper is. Even if it is the most unlikely of characters, the Samaritan.

The Samaritan helping this Jew from Jerusalem would be like a member of Hamas helping a Palestinian, a member of the Taliban helping a female Afghani translator for the American forces. A tutsi helping a hutu from Rwanda. A member of the Klu Klux Klan helping a black man in the south in the 1930s.

In his time of greatest need, help comes to this beaten, battered and near dead man from the most unlikely source. And the Samaritan doesn't just give him water, a couple of coins and his spare coat and send him on his way. It's clear that the help the Samaritan provides is extravagant. Not the minimum of what is required, but more than would be expected. First, he is moved with pity to come near the man even as everyone else has moved away. Then he binds his wounds with his own oil and wine, puts him up on his own animal, and, interrupting his journey, takes him to an inn and cares for him there. But that's still not the extent of it. He charges the innkeeper to continue the care, funds that care and makes a plan to accommodate any extra expenses.

This poor man, in his time of greatest need, got extravagant help from the least likely source.

I want to suggest that when we hear this story we don't *just* indict ourselves by hearing ourselves as the priest and the Levite and noting the moral tale as reminder that we could do better when it comes to caring for others and seeing their needs—although I don't want to stop us from doing that all together.

And I want to suggest that when we hear this story, we don't *just* hear ourselves in the role of the lawyer and take it as a reminder to expand our understanding of neighborliness, although no need to stop that all together either.

But instead, know that we are, each of us, that broken and battered man laying by the side of the road. On our own, we've got nothing. On our own, we can't be any better than our worst impulse. On our own, we only seek those things that create walls between us and God. On our own we look after only our own interests.

But God has rescued us. Rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved son. In the most unlikely way imaginable—a cross. And with an extravagance that knows no limits. With an extravagance that doesn't see the worst in us, with a love that remembers our sin no more, and with a mercy that picks us up, cares for us and sees to our future, even when we have turned away and forgotten that love.

And it's only through that love, a love made real for us in the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, a love that lifts us out of our own ditch, that we can “go and do likewise” as Jesus commands. It's only through that extravagant love that we can be the hand of God in the lives of others deeply and desperately in need. It's only because of Jesus that we can love others with just a hint of the limitless love that has been shown us.