

A Tale of Two Pities

Readings: Luke 10:25-37 (NRSV)
'After Second Shift' by Lowell Jaeger

"Who is my neighbor?" A lawyer asks Jesus. The author—or authors—of the Gospel of Luke tell us that Jesus doesn't give a direct answer to this question. He replies with a story. Jesus liked to do this, answer a specific question with a teaching story... and over the thousands of years since he did this people have interpreted these stories in many ways.

This story, this parable, begins, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho.' He was traveling a steep and rocky road. It is a short journey, only about 18 miles, but the elevation loss is over 3,000 feet. We can imagine the traveler's ears popping to adjust to the elevation change. We can also imagine his nervousness. The road to Jericho was notorious for its danger, for the bandits who frequently attacked travelers. But our fictional traveler takes this trip anyway. Perhaps he has business to attend to. Perhaps someone he loves is waiting in Jericho. Perhaps he just needs a change of scenery. Jesus does not include the reason for the journey in the story he tells.

Along his journey, the traveler is stopped by a band of robbers. The robbers take whatever valuables the traveler is carrying. They also take his clothes and beat him. They leave him for dead, naked and bleeding in a ditch on the side of the road. The traveler lays there, hoping that someone would come to his rescue.

A short time or a long time later, this story is short on details, a priest comes walking down The Jericho Road. Can you imagine how the injured traveler's heart leaps for joy when he hears approaching footsteps? Someone was here to rescue him! And it was a priest. A Jewish priest who served at the Temple in Jerusalem. Surely, this man would come to save him, take him from the ditch and deliver him to the nearest hospital – or the first century equivalent of a hospital.

But rescue is not what happens next. Jesus says that when the priest saw the dying man, he skirts over to the opposite side of the road and continues on his way. He likely feels pity or concern for the injured man. He might say a silent prayer or hope that someone else would pass by soon and tend the man, but this priest doesn't do anything. Why doesn't he care for this dying traveler?

In his telling of this story, Jesus doesn't say why the priest doesn't stop for the man. But that hasn't stopped interpreters from developing their own ideas. The most common reason given for why this priest doesn't stop is that he is concerned with ritual purity.

In the Book of Numbers in the Hebrew Bible – chapter 19, verse 11 for those of you following along – it is stated that a person who comes into contact with a corpse will be considered unclean for seven days. They will not be able to participate in the life of the community for a week. Perhaps the priest in the story thinks the bloodied man on the side of the road is dead or that his death is imminent and unavoidable. If the priest touches the man and he is already dead or dies as the priest cares for him, the priest would not be able to do his job for a week. Perhaps the priest has a really busy week coming up, full of services, pastoral visits, and family obligations. Perhaps there are already priests at the temple waiting out their own seven day periods after touching a corpse and the temple just can't spare anyone else this week. Perhaps the priest does a quick mental calculation and decides that the service that he is planning to offer his

community in the next week is more valuable than the comfort he might be able to offer the dying traveler. We don't know. The reason that the priest keeps walking isn't provided in the story.

This doesn't stop those who value this parable from interpreting this detail of it to serve their own ends. Throughout the history of the Christian church, people have used the example of this priest who passes over to the other side of the road to condemn all Jews. There is a terrible history of interpretation that equates Judaism with strict law-following and Christianity with compassion. Not only is this view hateful, inaccurate, and self-serving, but there is no evidence that Jesus intended those who heard this story to draw that conclusion. This interpretation is a perversion of the story and its purpose.

Blaming the priest's inaction on ideas of ritual purity that are foreign to us keeps us from self-reflection. We can think, "since ritual purity isn't part of my life, surely I wouldn't act like that priest if I was in his shoes." Yet, our modern ideas about purity are not limited to the five second rule practiced in school cafeterias, which holds that any food dropped on the ground is safe to eat if it is picked up within five seconds.

Every culture, including ours, has ideas about purity that animate it. What does it mean to be pure? What can contaminate us? What contaminates our community? What contaminates our nation? Croatian-American Christian theologian Miroslav Volf said that "Especially in situations of economic and political uncertainty and conflict, we will insist on pure identity. If race matters to us, then we will want our "blood" to be pure, untainted by the "blood" of strangers. If land matters to us, then we will want our soil to be pure, without the presence of others. If culture matters to us, then we will want our language and customs to be pure, cleansed of foreign words and foreign ways. This is the logic of purity. It attends the notion of identity, which rests on difference from the other. The consequences of the logic of purity in a pluralistic world are often deadly. We have to keep the other at bay, even by means of extreme violence, so as to avoid contamination."¹

It doesn't take too much looking to see our cultural notions of purity on display all around us. Our politics are all about the logic of purity right now. Who counts as a "real" American, whatever that means? We saw purity performed in the Alabama special election this week, as a significant number of Republican voters chose write-in candidates. Absent an organized effort, such votes won't elect anyone, but they allowed the voter to feel pure, untainted by the sexual assault allegations and hateful rhetoric from one candidate – or the political positions held by the other with which the voters disagreed. The other Alabama Senator acted out this sort of purity.

Concepts of purity stretch beyond politics and inform so many of our choices. For two years in my early adulthood, I stopped eating apples. I had spent a few summers working with farmers and farm workers in Central Washington State and saw the horrible conditions endured by people who harvest apples, cherries, and hops. Every time I ate an apple, I visualized people I met who were sick from overexposure to pesticides or living in makeshift camps because there was no housing that they could afford. I stopped eating apples. I purified myself of that issue. It took me too long to realize that my action didn't help anyone, that I wasn't motivated by compassion, but by purity. My decision to not eat apples didn't improve farm worker's living conditions in the slightest; it only made it so I didn't have to think about it. I wasn't part of some larger effort to change the way food is produced in this country. My small choice had no impact other than as a symbolic disconnection from the interdependent web of all existence. Confusing

¹ Volf, Miroslav, 'Living with the "Other," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, vol 39 no 1-2 (Winter-Spring 2002.) 8-25.
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compassion and purity is a trap that those of us in privileged positions need to be wary of. Not eating apples was not compassion; it was an attempt to free myself from the contaminant and discomfort posed by being in relationship with people who were suffering so I could eat. Distancing ourselves from others' suffering and alleviating others' suffering are not the same thing.

But back to the story. A short time or a long time after the priest passed by our injured traveler—again the Bible is light on the details—another person comes walking down the road. Again, we can imagine that the injured man might have become excited to hear footsteps approaching, his hopes somewhat tempered after his recent experience. Again, the passerby sees the injured man on the side of the road, skitters over to the other side of the road – and continues his travels. Again, the authors of Luke don't explain why the man does not stop. Perhaps the man thinks that the injured traveler was there to entrap passersby. As people would go to the side of the road to offer help, a band of robbers that he was colluding with would prey on the compassionate. Perhaps the man thinks that the injured traveler somehow deserves his injury. Perhaps his injury was retribution for previous misdeeds.

All that Jesus says about the second passerby is that he is a Levite, a member of a Jewish family whose traditional duties include working in the temple and maintaining cities of refuge. These cities were a refuge for people accused of manslaughter. The accused person who fled to the city of refuge would escape vigilantes seeking revenge, have a fair trial, and be taken care of by the Levites if found innocent. Perhaps the Levite walking down the Jericho road has business to attend to in a nearby city of refuge, a long list of people to care for, a heavy caseload. Perhaps he sees the injured man on the side of the road and knows he wouldn't be very good at helping him. Perhaps he just has too much on his plate; in addition to the people who are his professional responsibility, he has aging parents or a child in need of special attention or a close friend in crisis. Perhaps his well of compassion ran dry; there was just no energy left for the stranger.

Sometimes, when we cannot take the compassionate action we might like to, when we just can't stop for the injured traveler on the side of the road, we can take comfort in the knowledge that the universe is not resting on our shoulders. We are not alone. When we reach our limits, it is an opportunity for others to step in. In his lovely book on vocation, *Let Your Life Speak*, Quaker Educator Parker Palmer writes 'It took me a long time to realize that although everyone needs to be loved, I cannot be the source of that gift for everyone who asks me for it... If I give [love] I do not possess, I give a false and dangerous gift, a gift that looks like love but is, in reality, loveless—a gift given more from my need to prove myself than from the other's need to be cared for. That kind of giving is not only loveless but faithless, based on the arrogant and mistaken notion that God has no way of channeling love to the other except through me. Yes, we are created for community, to be there, in love, for one another... When we reach the limits of our own capacity to love, community means trusting that someone else will be available for the person in need.'²

As he passes the injured traveler, perhaps the Levite man trusts his community. Perhaps he hopes that there is a benevolent stranger coming up behind him on the road who will be able to help the injured man. He does nothing. Perhaps the sight of the bloody man in the ditch lingers with the Levite in the decades to come, coming to him in idle moments, in those times when he lists his shortcomings. The image of that man might never leave him. He might always wonder what became of the injured man.

² Palmer, Parker. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000. page. 47-48

A short time or a long while later—again the Gospel doesn't tell us—another person comes down the road. Again, the injured traveler hears the approaching footsteps and begins to hope.

The person who approaches this time is a Samaritan, a member of the group that stayed in the land of Israel when it was overrun by foreign invaders. In Jesus' time, Samaritans were considered impure—their worship was a mix of Jewish and Gentile practices. They were the lowest of the low, enemies of the Jews. They were the opposite of good. This is hard for most of us to grasp since the phrase 'good Samaritan' has become so separated from its original context. To the initial audience of this story a good Samaritan was a contradictory, almost impossible idea.

This Samaritan is good, a shock to the story's initial audience. This person that no one expects anything good from, goes to the injured traveler. He is moved with compassion. He cleans the injured man's wounds and bandages them. The Samaritan takes the injured traveler to a nearby inn and spends the night tending to him. The next morning, the Samaritan has to continue on his journey. He leaves two days wages with the innkeeper and says, "please, take care of this injured man. Spend whatever you need to. If the money that I have given you is not enough for his care please spend more. I will repay you."

And that is where Jesus ends the story. We do not learn if the injured traveler lives or dies. The rest of the story is left to our imaginings. As he ends the story, Jesus asks a question. "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

The lawyer whose question prompted the story, replies, "The one who showed him mercy."

And Jesus says to all who heard the story. "Go and do likewise."

May we all go and do likewise.

May it be so, may we make it so, and amen.