

BREAKING THE RULES, PART 1: SEEING AND DOING

Sermon preached by Rev. Sarah Segal McCaslin

July 15th, 2007

Scripture: Luke 10: 25-37

Let me dispel a few common myths about the story of the Good Samaritan at the outset, while my voice is clear and your eyes are open, and the pews and chairs you are sitting on haven't begun to feel like devices of torture. If it is the only thing you absorb today, that is a good thing, because the myths of the Good Samaritan are widespread, and they mask the sophistication and subtlety of the story and its impact on the Christian life.

First, the story of the Good Samaritan does not begin with a man lying half-dead in a ditch on the road to Jericho. Second, the story of the Good Samaritan is not a sweet and simple illustration of the Christian life, but a complex story meant to cultivate an "uneasy conscience" as a means of enabling us to discern God's call in the concrete moment.¹ While the story seems like straightforward and indisputably good theology all by itself, it is not meant to stand alone. And last, the story is not anti-Jewish rhetoric and was never meant to be used in arguments for the supremacy of the Christian faith over the Jewish.

So there you have it- the Reader's Digest version of this sermon, though I've not revealed yet the really good stuff- the rich and juicy center of this text that will make you want to jump out of your seats and into the Christian life with even more passion. I've got to keep your curiosity piqued, of course!

The full text which encompasses the Good Samaritan story begins as you heard it today, with the conversation between Jesus and the lawyer. And the text which encompasses the Good Samaritan does not end with Jesus' line, "Go and do likewise," but actually continues on for five more verses, with the story of Mary and Martha that we will hear next week. I am bowing to convention by preaching on these texts separately, but I have labeled my sermon in two parts as a way of considering this story in its entirety. That is not to say that there is nothing to be learned

¹ Bruce Epperly is Professor of Practical Theology and Director of Continuing Education at Lancaster Theological Seminary. Quotes and ideas used in this sermon come from an online lectionary-based article: <http://www.processandfaith.org/lectionary/YearC/2006-2007/2007-07-15.shtml>

in hearing this story in part; and this is not a sneaky way for me to get you back to church next week! But today's story is to be continued... the lesson that Jesus offers the lawyer is bigger and broader than the condensed and simplified message of the Good Samaritan as we may know it.

So, to begin from the proper beginning, means beginning with the interchange between Jesus and the lawyer. Though instead of thinking of a lawyer in the modern sense, think instead of a religious scholar, someone- not a clergy person- who has devoted his entire life to the study of the Bible, in this case, the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. The term lawyer is sufficient in that context because there are hundreds of laws in the Old Testament, and this Torah scholar would have known them all, and known them not just professionally, but personally and faithfully, as well.

Now there are different ways of reading these opening words, of interpreting the same passage with dramatically different meaning. Most study Bibles and commentaries interpret this passage as one in which the lawyer, as part of the religious elite who disputed Jesus' authority, challenges Jesus to a theological duel, in order to show up Jesus and prove his own righteousness. In this interpretation, the lawyer sort of swaggers up to Jesus and addresses him with one part arrogance and two parts condescension. "So, Jesus, can you tell me what I must do to inherit eternal life? Huh?" And when Jesus responds, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" the lawyer snorts, 'this fool is throwing it back at me because he doesn't really know the law!' 'What a phony!' "Yeah, I know what's written in the law. 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." Heh! Lawyer- 1, Jesus- 0. And when Jesus responds again, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live" the lawyer rolls his eyes. 'This is the guy that everyone's making such a big fuss about?' 'Puh-lease.' And so on...

Luise Schottroff, a prominent New Testament scholar and feminist theologian, lays out an argument for a second interpretation, in her book, *The Parables of Jesus*, and she does so convincingly.² Instead of comparing this passage to others in which the Pharisees and Sadducees test Jesus, Luise Schottroff situates this interchange within the Jewish tradition of discussion and learning. In this interpretation, the lawyer makes Jesus his teacher. He presents himself to Jesus as a student, sincere in his desire to learn.

² Luise Schottroff. *The Parables of Jesus*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006.

“Teacher, what must I do to inherit life in its eternal fullness?” Jesus encourages the lawyer to start with what he already knows- the law. And the lawyer correctly condenses down the laws of God to these words from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. And Jesus offers this lesson, “Do this, and you will live.” But the lawyer, student now, needing to defend his questions, wants more. “OK, you are telling me to do these things I have recited from the law, but how? Who is my neighbor?”

It’s remarkable, isn’t it? How the shift in inflection turns the story on its head. Is the lawyer arrogant and self-righteous, or is he humble and sincere? I am suggesting that the story of the Good Samaritan, understood in its entirety, speaks to the latter reading. That what Jesus and the lawyer are working out together, in discussion, is how love for God is made concrete, and how such love can become a deed. We are reading a profoundly faithful conversation between a student and teacher. But not just any student or any teacher-

This lawyer is a member of an elite social class, well-educated and highly respected. It is absolutely scandalous behavior for him to seek learning from Jesus, who is a poor, uneducated, itinerant prophet. This lawyer is breaking all sorts of rules by sitting at Jesus’ feet to learn how following God’s law plays out in concrete behavior and action. We’re not talking breaking the rules of law; we’re talking about breaking social norms and rules of behavior.

It would be like first generation immigrants, legal and illegal, drafting our nation’s immigration policies. Or like the poor crafting our city’s welfare laws. Or like people with schizophrenia informing us on mental health policies. Modern day truth and reconciliation commissions model these inverted hierarchies, when victims of crimes and government injustices speak as the experts and specialists on events and policies that affect them. Politicians and other leaders, who hold traditional positions of power, sit at the feet of these teachers, to learn.

It is this inversion, this flipping upside down and breaking of the rules that initiates the familiar and coveted story of the Good Samaritan, an illustration from the teacher Jesus about compassion and the search for eternal life.

A man lies in a ditch on the dangerous road to Jericho. He is covered in blood, unconscious, possibly dead. The priest and Levite, we read, cross over to the other side of the road and hurry on. The Samaritan, who is from a people often in a hostile relationship with the

Jewish people- though sharing more in common than not- does not cross over the side of the road. He stops, leans down and touches the bloody man, lays his hands on his wounds as he disinfects them with wine and softens them with oil. He hoists this half-dead man onto his animal, getting his robes filthy, straining under the weight. He tolerates the odd stares from passers-by as he carries this man to a quiet place to rest. The Samaritan stays with the wounded man through the night, and then, unbelievably, places two days' salary in the innkeeper's hands, so that the wounded man may continue to recover.

It is an astounding act of compassion and generosity, for a thousand different reasons, not the least of which that the Samaritan voluntarily and gently laid hands on the bleeding, wounded body of a complete stranger.

In April, I had the great fortune of traveling to Brazil with a college friend. In order to keep costs down, on two occasions we took overnight bus rides, leaving at 6pm and arriving in the next town at 6am. At 6am after our first overnight ride, we stood in line at the ticket counter waiting to purchase more bus tickets. I glanced out of the side of my eye a man in a wheelchair. He was rail thin, with both legs amputated above his knees. Another man stood behind him and pushed him through the crowd. I assumed this other man was a friend or family member, or maybe an aide of some kind.

Thirty minutes later, my friend and I sat on the curb outside the bus station, waiting for a ride to our hotel. I saw the man in the wheelchair again, this time with a different man. They were speaking quietly to one another, and speaking Portuguese, so I could not tell what they were talking about. Then a third man walked over, this time clearly just an onlooker, and began conferring with them. The first man took a towel from the man in the wheelchair and laid it on the ground, and then he walked behind the wheelchair and grabbed the man under his arms. The third man then reached out and wrapped his large hands around the skinny thighs of the man in the wheelchair. Together, they lifted him up and placed him gently onto the towel on the ground.

I don't know why the man wanted to get out of his wheelchair. I don't know what he intended to do, sitting on that towel. But I was absolutely stunned, watching these strangers perform this incredibly intimate act of kindness. That man, placing his hands on what little remained of this stranger's legs. And all I could think was, "I could never do that."

We are so quick to vilify the priest and the Levite, to call them hypocrites, or worse, to claim that they are proof of the Jewish faith's lack of compassion. There is no evidence of such anti-Jewish

sentiment in the rest of the Gospel of Luke or the New Testament. We don't really know their situation. Maybe they were rushing to the Temple in Jerusalem and worried about becoming impure and unable to perform their duties if they touched a corpse. Maybe they were scared that the perpetrator of the crime was hiding behind a bush to attack them, as well.

Pondering the priest and the Levite's decisions without judgment invites us to explore our own personal decision-making process. Bruce Epperly, a professor at Lancaster Theological Seminary and the Protestant chaplain at Georgetown University when I was a student, says this:

Surely we have passed persons in need in order to fulfill our duties as church leaders, pastors, friends, and family members. We have been 'prudent Good Samaritans,' giving enough, but not too much, so that we might provide appropriate care of our families and congregations as well as persons in need.³

It does not further our understanding of the text to slander the priest and Levite in the story; because the reality is that we probably share more in common with them than the Samaritan. We are constantly choosing between duty and duty. Working and caring for our families is not optional, not an extracurricular activity that is secondary to the Christian life.

What ultimately distinguishes the priest and the Levite from the Samaritan is not their avoidance, but the Samaritan's mercy. It is not the priest and Levite's absence of compassion, but the presence of the Samaritan's compassion in a concrete deed.

What Jesus offers the lawyer at the opening of this story, consistent with the Jewish tradition of discussion and interpretation, is a concrete example of what it means to 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. What is required to inherit life in its eternal fullness is more than knowing and believing, it is seeing and doing. To inherit eternal life, according to Jesus, requires understanding the difference between the love of law and the law of love.

The difference between the love of law- following the rules because they're easy, because that's how things have always been done, because it might be scary or weird to transgress those boundaries of what is socially acceptable- and the law of love- reaching out to one with a measure of love that you already have, becoming a student of a different teacher, risking the safety of rules for the danger that love demands. And Jesus offers this lesson in as precise a manner as you can ask for such broad questions about eternal life and neighborliness.

³ Bruce Epperly

On a daily basis, we are pulled in a million different directions. When the alarm rings in the morning, it is the rare person who wakes up with the thought, ‘What can I do today to enact the law of love and find life in its eternal fullness?’ If you are like me, you wake up with no thought in your head other than, ‘Is it another day already?’ And it is the rare person, indeed, who would approach a bloody, unconscious stranger, and reach his or her hands out. The Samaritan’s action does not point towards a generalized love of all humanity; his action is a specific, discrete act of kindness to an individual. A miniscule act of love if we consider the scale of suffering in our world. Yet this is what Jesus offers to the lawyer. Not a prescription for saving the world, or for becoming the Savior himself. Jesus says, you know the words, they are written upon your heart. Now go and do; see what is needed and act it out in your life.

If this act of compassion now seems like a grain of sand on an eternal beach, let me offer you this story from a midrash on the book of Leviticus that is in the same tradition of discussion and learning to which this passage from Luke belongs. A midrash is an early Jewish interpretation of a biblical text that clarifies a point of law and illustrates a moral principle:

Rabbi Huna said, “Whoever visits the sick takes away one sixtieth of whatever ails the patient.”

Those gathered around him objected to Rabbi Huna and said, “If so, let sixty people visit him and let him climb down from his bed and go with them to the marketplace.”

Rabbi Huna said to them, “It is indeed one sixtieth, but that is on condition that each loves him as much as he loves himself. But in any event they help him.”⁴

To inherit life in its eternal fullness, to gain the promises that God offers to us through Christ, requires that we love God with our whole selves and that we love our neighbors as ourselves. How do we do that? And to whom? It’s simple, Jesus says, by seeing and doing. No measure of love or compassion is too small, for in any event, it helps.

But now we’ve come back to the beginning and to my promise to you that this story is to be continued. Jesus wants from us is more than the action of seeing and doing...

To be continued.

⁴ Schottroff, p. 133.

