

In his day, he would have been called vile.
 Dirty. Heretic. Dumb.
 Traitor. Against God's will. Abomination.

And yet we know him as "good."
 The Good Samaritan.
 A glowing exemplar of compassion and moral action.
 An excellent morality lesson fit for every children's Bible.
 We've even named secular laws after his Goodness.

When we read the Parable of the Good Samaritan,
 we hear within it a teaching about love
 and compassion
 and neighborly action.
 We read the parable and ask ourselves,
Would I walk by the other side?
Or would I be a neighbor?
 And we conclude,
Jesus wants us to be the neighbor. To spot and help. Act with mercy.

Yet through the title of "The Good Samaritan,"
 and by focusing on the helping and compassionate actions,
 we lose much of the original radicalness of the story's teaching.
 This is an offensive parable,
 one that landed, in its first telling,
 with a gut-punch.

In order to feel this original outrage,
 we need a little more understanding about the formula Jesus was using,
 the Lawyer whom this story was told to,
 and who Samaritans were.
 Then the Parable of the Good Samaritan
 gets a good amount more offensive
 to our modern sensibilities.

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After the Lawyer asks the question, "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus begins telling a parable—a moral fable—
that sounds as familiar to his first-century audience
as Goldy Locks and the Three Bears does to us modern people.

Jesus' audience has heard these kinds of stories before.
To put it in our modern terms,
these listeners know that Mama Bear's porridge is too hot
and Daddy Bear's porridge is too cold
so obviously it's whatever Baby Bear has
that's going to be is juuuust right.

So, when these first-century listeners hear a story that involves "A Priest . . .
then a Levite . . ." they expect that the next person to walk by
will be *an Israelite*.
That's their literary expectation: "Priest, Levite, Israelite."
Official religious person. Especially religious person. And everyone else.
That's the formula Jesus is using,
the story that everyone presumes he will tell.

Knowing the formula,
our next step to understanding why the parable ends up being so offensive
is taking a look at the person to whom Jesus tells the parable:
this self-confident Lawyer.
This man, well educated in his religious tradition,
comes to Jesus with a question
about what he must do to inherit eternal life,
and Jesus knows that he already knows the right answer:
Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself.

But the Lawyer wants to know more
about the collection of people he must love,
so he asks, "And who *is* my neighbor?"
Here's his hidden agenda:
he's trying to find out who is inside the circle of this neighbor-commandment.
He wants to limit, confine, or at least clearly define
who is worthy of his love.
Jesus knows his exclusive motives,
so Jesus is going to expose and flaunt them

by choosing a revolting protagonist
in the parable he tells.

In the parable,
Jesus gives the Lawyer two people with whom he should easily identify.
After setting up the parable's central conflict
—a beat-up man in the ditch needs help or he'll die—
Jesus talks about a priest who came down the road.
The Lawyer would have LOVED this priest.
As a religious and learned man himself,
the Lawyer would have looked up to a verified, bona-fide public religious
leader.
And this is someone OBVIOUSLY expected to help.
But he doesn't. He passes by on the other side.
There's no excuse made, and really, there is no excuse.

Second, Jesus tells the Lawyer about a Levite,
who, while not a priest, is someone of social and religious import.
Another person the Lawyer would have respected and identified with.
But the Levite doesn't help either. He also passes by on the other side.
Again, there's no excuse made, and really, there is no excuse.

Jesus has now given the Lawyer two people with whom he should identify:
first, the priest, and then, the Levite.
They are educated people. People of social import. Persons of means.
But these people, the people the Lawyer understands,
they end up making the WRONG decision.

Now here's where the parable takes its offensive turn.
Instead of telling him about Joe-Schmoe Israelite walking by next,
Jesus gives the Lawyer someone with whom he CANNOT identify.
Someone whom he will totally REFUSE to admit he's like at all:
A Samaritan.

Now we arrive at our third key needed for understanding:
why Samaritans were so offensive in their day.

To Israelites, Samaritans were an enemy.

But not the far-away, distant, mythic kind of enemy.
 Samaritans were an in-your-backyard
 try-to-avoid-them-at-all-costs
 a-lot-like-you-but-different-in-all-the-wrong-ways
 kind of enemy.

Samaritans *said* they worshiped the same God
 and read the same Scriptures as the Israelites,
 but all the proper Israelites knew it was a lie.
 Samaritans had a *different* religion, *another* language, *separate* customs.
 If you were an Israelite like the Lawyer,
 you worried about your housing prices
 when a Samaritan family moved into your neighborhood.
 The hairs on the back of your neck pricked up
 when you heard their language in your favorite restaurant.
 You did NOT want your daughter dating one of their boys.

All things considered,
 the Israelites and Samaritans should have gotten along.
 Their religions agreed on all the MAIN points,
 but differed in some of the details.
 Those details, though, were important enough
 and divergent enough
 to make them HATE each other.

And quite honestly, I get that.
 Sometimes I feel betrayed by people whom I *should* share much in common
 with,
 but with whom I strongly disagree on a couple of key points.
 People who *say* they are the same as me,
 but then we fight over something I think is *ESSENTIAL*.
 We have a problem similar to Israelites and Samaritans
 in North American Lutheranism and Christianity.
 I've never been able to figure it out:
 Why is it so much easier for me to show compassion to an atheist
 than it is a pastor in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod?
 Why is it more comfortable for me to imagine my daughter
 visiting a mosque with a Muslim friend

than going to church with a Southern Baptist friend?

Now we can begin to feel the original offense of this parable.
 The one person the Lawyer could NOT identify with,
 the one he would have found MOST offensive,
 the one he would NEVER have wanted as a neighbor
 well, THAT'S the one who stops and helps.
 That's the one who administers first aid,
 and gives freely of his money
 and saves the dying man's life.
 The one who the Lawyer wants absolutely NOTHING to do with,
 that's the one who truly does the right thing.

No wonder the parable calls the Lawyer up short.
 Jesus asks him the concluding question, "Which of these, do you think,
 was a neighbor?"
 and he might actually know the right answer.
 But he cannot bring himself to SAY IT.
 The Lawyer cannot reply straightforwardly by saying "The Samaritan"
 because of his prejudice and exclusivity.
 So, he simply replies, "The one who showed mercy."
 It is so difficult for him to imagine the Samaritan saving the man,
 that he can't even speak that reality.

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How long do you think the Lawyer had to sit with that message from Jesus?
 How long before Jesus' teaching sunk in?
 How long does it take for someone to undo a lifetime,
 or even just a long time,
 of prejudicial thinking?
 What is it like to see
 that the very people we think are the most OFFENSIVE
 might just be the ones who show others and us
 goodness and kindness and compassion?

We don't get that answer from this unfortunate Lawyer;
 we just know he walks away.

But as followers of Jesus, we are faced with these same questions today.

So, who is your Samaritan?
 Not your mythic, far-off enemy,
 but the group of people or person who,
 if inserted into this parable,
 would offend you and make you angry?
 The type of person who,
 if you were the man in the ditch,
 you'd have some soul-searching to do if they helped you?

Maybe your three people go something like,
 Upper-class. Middle-class. Smelly Homeless Poor.
 Christian. Jew. Muslim
 Citizen. Green-card holder. Undocumented.
 Male. Female. Trans.
 Or maybe your third person is not a group and type.
 Maybe it's Your Relentlessly Annoying Coworker
 or Horrible Parent
 or That Other Mom From Day Care Whose Kid You Can't Stand.

Whomever you exempt from the Love-Your-Neighbor-As-Yourself
 Commandment,
 with this parable, Jesus invites you to consider
 how they too are capable of mercy.
 How they can also teach us about the love of God.
 And how our own prejudices and boundaries confine whom we consider as
 worthy of love,
 our love or God's love.

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When we read this parable,
 we love to cast ourselves in the role of the Good Samaritan.
 But today I'm seeing us more in the Lawyer's shoes,
 with Jesus flaunting and exposing the boundaries we draw
 to show us how God's love crosses those very boundaries *for God's sake*.

I hear Jesus saying,
"I know you have exceptions to the people you love.
I want to confront them,
break them,
with God's transgressive love."
And I hear Jesus saying all this
as part of his mission
to save us.

Because, in a way, our life does depend on it.
Our life together,
the life to which God calls us,
requires us to see people differently.
To cast aside false prejudices and harmful biases.
To see the enemy as part of our being healed and made whole.
To believe in a world where a love from someone so other,
so foreign, so easy to reject
comes for us.
Because that Love has come and comes and will come for us,
that Love died and is risen and will come again for us,
changing us, forgiving our sins, and transforming us.
That Love is named Jesus,
the one with whom and in whom this story begins and ends.

AMEN.