

I recently read an observation that in the gospels, Jesus is asked nearly two hundred questions, and Jesus himself asks other people over three hundred questions, but Jesus hardly ever gives direct answers to the questions he was asked. Curious, considering how the Christian church throughout the centuries has so often established itself as the voice of absolute certainty on so many questions, so much so that you would think Jesus' commandment was to be right, not to love one another. Today's gospel is just one of many corrections to our love of right answers and challenges to our unflinching certainty.

Luke tells us the lawyer's motives in asking Jesus his questions, neither of which is to learn anything: the first is to test Jesus; the second is to justify himself. I don't know if you've ever attended a lecture or presentation when the speaker allows time for questions at the end, and someone stands up and says, "I don't really have a question, but I wanted to comment on what you said..." and then they ramble on about something irrelevant to try to make themselves look smart. Yeah, that guy was around even 2000 years ago.

People who have never even opened a bible can tell you what a good Samaritan is, though Jesus never calls the Samaritan *good*. But the implication that he is the good guy would have been a shocking contradiction to the lawyer: Samaritans were supposed to be the bad guys—there was civil war type history between Samaria and Israel. Priests and Levites were supposed to be the good guys. That's not to say that anyone would have necessarily expected the priest or the Levite to help the guy in the ditch, but they were part of the tribe. Jesus is talking to this lawyer who considers himself a good guy, and Jesus names two other good guys before getting to the punch line.

A priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan walk down the road to Jericho. The priest and the Levite pass by the guy in the ditch, even though they know better and even though the Law compelled them to help. But it's the Samaritan who sees him and is moved with pity—which is the nice way of saying he got that sick, sinking feeling in his gut at seeing how badly the man had been beaten. The Samaritan helps the man, probably going above and beyond what the lawyer would have expected, definitely going above and beyond what the priest and the Levite did, which was nothing. So Jesus again asks a question: *Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man in the ditch?*

The lawyer answers, *The one who showed him mercy...* but notice that Jesus doesn't tell him that he's correct. Jesus tells him to go and do likewise—that is, to show mercy; Jesus implies that the Samaritan, the literal foreigner, is his neighbor. But Jesus never says that the priest and the Levite are *not* neighbors to the robbed man. The truth is that we have all sorts of

neighbors, good neighbors and not so good neighbors, and that we ourselves are sometimes good neighbors and sometimes not so good neighbors. But Jesus teaches us to act with godly compassion toward others and to *expect godly compassion* from *others*, whether we think of them as our neighbors or not.

Usually when we call someone a good Samaritan, we mean that they offered help beyond what they were legally or morally required to do. But that wasn't the case with the original Samaritan in Jesus' story. The lawyer may have *assumed* the Samaritan wouldn't help, because he thought Samaritans were bad guys; he may have been *surprised* the Samaritan helped, because he didn't think of Samaritans as morally upstanding people. But in fact, Samaritans lived under the same law as the priest, the Levite, the guy in the ditch, and the lawyer who was testing Jesus. It was not that the Samaritan earned his place as a neighbor when the priest and Levite had not; the Samaritan was his neighbor, along with the priest and the Levite, the whole time. The surprise wasn't that the bad guy did something good; the surprise was that the bad guy was never a bad guy in the first place.

Jesus instructs the lawyer—and by extension, us— to *go and do likewise*: show mercy like the Samaritan showed mercy. And that's no small commandment considering how much suffering there is in the world, how little mercy is shown to those who are suffering, and how easy it is to pass by on the other side—even to pass by and still be seen as a good guy. Think of it this way—we excuse all sorts of action or inaction in ourselves or in people we think belong in our circle, but we criticize that same behavior in outsiders. The lawyer could have come up with all sorts of reasons why the priest and the Levite didn't help without really thinking any less of them as people; but if the Samaritan hadn't helped, well, that would just be because he was a *Samaritan*. More than just instructing us, to be merciful, Jesus teaches us not to assume we know who is a good neighbor and who is not. Think of the stories that make it into the news of “unlikely” heroes doing unexpected works of charity. We're surprised at them for doing some unexpected good, when we really should be surprised at ourselves for thinking of them as less generous, merciful, or charitable than we think of ourselves...especially when we realize that like the priest or the Levite, we ignored a need that someone else filled. Jesus wants us love our neighbors as ourselves, *and* Jesus wants us to broaden our definition of neighbor—not just to make us better people, but to admit that many of the people to whom we feel superior are already living out God's law of love better than we have been. It's a big world that needs a lot of love and mercy; may we not overlook anyone who can teach us how to do that holy work.