

In her book-length study of Jesus's parables (Short Stories by Jesus, 2014), Amy-Jill Levine suggests that religion is meant "to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable."

She goes on to argue that we would do well to think of the parables of Jesus as doing this afflicting. "Therefore, if we hear a parable and think, 'I really like that' or, worse, fail to take any challenge, we are not listening well enough."

The difficulty for me (and I assume, for many Christians) is that Jesus's parables are familiar and beloved, so much so that I don't experience them as afflictions. I know many of them— and therein lies the great danger: they no longer challenge me. I read, I nod, and I walk away. The parables I love most don't lay me bare.

The Gospel reading for this week — the parable of the Good Samaritan — presents exactly this dilemma. I learned the story in Sunday School, and have known it by heart for years. A man got robbed and was left for dead, a priest and a Levite passed him by, and a

Samaritan stopped and helped. The Samaritan, showing mercy, exemplified neighborliness. I should do likewise.

What, I wonder now, would Jesus's original audience make of my casual reading? Would they agree with it? Surely there's nothing wrong with reading the Good Samaritan parable as a "go and do likewise" story. After all, we are called as imitators of Christ to assist, to show concern, and to offer compassionate care to those in need. The Good Samaritan offers us a beautiful example to follow, and we would do well to pay attention. But is that it? Is that all the "afflicting" this story has for us? Or did Jesus have something more provocative in mind?

Perhaps it will help to place the story in a fuller context. As Luke tells it, a lawyer approaches Jesus with a million dollar question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" I know that scholars often give the lawyer a bad rap for testing Jesus, but I like the boldness of his question. He wants to live fully. He's not messing around in the shallows with his query; he's deep-sea diving. "Show me the good stuff, Jesus. Show me the path to eternal life."

But Jesus is too savvy a teacher to answer the question directly, so he turns it back on his would-be student: "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" The lawyer (no fool himself) gives Jesus a concise and inspiring A+ answer: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus congratulates the lawyer on his doctrinal precision: "You have given the right answer," and encourages him to take the essential next step: "Do this, and you will live."

But the lawyer — miffed, perhaps, that Jesus wants more than textbook theology — asks for further clarification. "Who is my neighbor?" Or, to put it crassly: "Who is not my neighbor? How much love are we talking here, Jesus? Can you be specific? Where can I draw the line? Outside my front door? At the edges of my neighborhood? Along the cultural and racial boundaries I was raised with? I mean, there are lines... aren't there?"

I assume the lawyer would have loved to discuss the finer points of responsible neighborliness. What better way to put off getting his hands

dirty than to talk theory for hours? But Jesus doesn't take the bait.

Instead he tells a story. A story whose main character we know so well, we've named hospitals, nursing homes, relief agencies and humanitarian organizations after him. In the U.S, he even has a law coined in his honor: any modern-day "good samaritan" who stops to help a stranger along the road will enjoy certain legal protections for his trouble.

As Jesus tells it, a man was walking down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked by bandits. They robbed, beat, stripped, and left him for dead. Soon afterwards, a priest came by. Seeing the wounded man, he passed by on the other side of the road. A short while later, a Levite did likewise. But then a Samaritan came along. Seeing the stranded victim, he drew close, and felt great pity. He bandaged the man's wounds, annointed them with oil and wine, carried him to the nearest inn on his own animal, paid the innkeeper for the victim's further care, and promised to return with more money as needed.

"So. Which of the three was a neighbor to the man who was robbed?" Jesus asks the lawyer at the conclusion of the story. "The one who showed him mercy," the lawyer replies. "Go and do likewise," Jesus says again. "Do this and you will live."

Do this. Draw close. Show mercy. Extend kindness. Live out your theology in hands-on care for other people. Don't just think love. Do it. Okay, makes sense to me. But I'm not afflicted yet, are you? What are we missing?

The story changes, I think, depending on where we locate ourselves within it. If you're like me, you probably locate yourself in the priest and the Levite on bad days, and in the Good Samaritan on better ones. Sometimes you see a need and you pass it by because you're too busy or preoccupied. Too afraid, overwhelmed, or exhausted to care. But the Good Samaritan is still the ideal you hope to achieve. He is your example. He's the goal to strive towards.

Unless he's not. What if he's not? What if Jesus's parable is more than an example story? What if it's a reversal story? A story intended to upset our categories of good and bad, sacred and profane, benefactor and

recipient? If we too easily and comfortably identify with the Good Samaritan in this parable, maybe we're missing the point. Maybe the whole point of the Samaritan is that he is not us.

By the time Jesus told this story, the animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans was ancient, entrenched, and bitter. The two groups disagreed about everything that mattered: how to honor God, how to interpret the Scriptures, and where to worship. They practiced their faith in separate temples, read different versions of the Torah, and avoided social contact with each other whenever possible. Truth be told, they hated each other's guts. Though we're inclined to love the Good Samaritan, Jesus's choice to make him the hero of his story was nothing less than shocking to first century ears.

After all, he was the Other. The enemy of the Jews. The object of their fear, their arrogance, their disgust, and their judgment. He was the profane outcast.

Is there anything we can do in our contemporary lives to recover the scandal at the heart of this parable? Because its heart is a scandal. Think about it this way: Who is the last person on earth you'd ever want

to deem "a good guy?" The last person you'd ask to save your life?

Whom do you secretly hope to convert, fix, impress, control, or save — but never, ever need?

At the risk of offending any of you, I'll throw out some possibilities:

An Israeli Jewish man is robbed, and a Good Hamas member saves his life. A liberal Democrat is robbed, and a Good conservative Republican saves her life. A white supremacist is robbed, and a Good black teenager saves his life. A transgender woman is robbed, and a Good anti-LGBTQ activist saves her life. An atheist is robbed, and a Good Christian fundamentalist saves his life.

I don't mean for one moment to trivialize the real and agonizing differences that divide us. I dare not do that — not when those differences have stinging real-world consequences.

But the antagonism between the Jews and the Samaritans in Jesus's day was not imaginary; it was embodied and real. The differences between them were not easily negotiated; each was fully convinced that the other was wrong. So what Jesus did when he deemed

the Samaritan "good" was radical and risky; it stunned his Jewish listeners. He was asking them to dream of a different kind of kingdom. He was inviting them to consider the possibility that a person might add up to more than the sum of her political, racial, cultural, and economic identities. He was calling them to put aside the history they knew, and the prejudices they nursed. He was asking them to leave room for divine and world-altering surprises.

Perhaps what we need to do is locate ourselves, not in the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan, but in the wounded man, dying on the road. Notice that he is the only character in the story not defined by profession, social class, or religious belief. He has no identity at all except naked need.

Maybe we have to occupy his place in the story first — maybe we have to become the broken one, grateful to anyone at all who will show us mercy — before we can feel the unbounded compassion of the Good Samaritan. Why? Because all tribalism fall away on the broken road. All divisions of "us" and "them" disappear of necessity. When you're lying bloody in a ditch, what matters is not whose help you'd prefer,

whose way of practicing Christianity you like best, or whose politics you agree with. What matters is whether or not anyone will stop to show you mercy before you die.

If it hasn't happened yet — your encounter on that dark road — it will. Somehow, someday, somewhere, it will. In a hospital room? At a graveside? After a marriage fails? When a cherished job goes bust? After the storm, the betrayal, the war, the injury, the diagnosis? Somehow, someday, somewhere. For all of us. It will happen.

When it does, it won't be your theology that saves you. It won't be your cherished affiliations that matter. All that matters will be how quickly you swallow your pride and grab hold of that hand you hoped never to touch. How humbly you'll agree to receive help from the enemy you fear. How long you'll persist in the Lone Ranger fantasy we all cling to before you allow an unsavory Other to bless you.

"Who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asked. Your neighbor is the one who scandalizes you with compassion, Jesus answered. Your neighbor is the one who upends all the entrenched categories and shocks you with a fresh face of God. Your neighbor is the one who mercifully

steps over the ancient, bloodied line separating "us" from "them," and teaches you the real meaning of "Good."

What shall I do to inherit eternal life? Do this. Do this and you will live.

It's just that simple and it's just that hard.

Amen