

Faces of Discipleship: The Neighbor

*A sermon preached on Luke 10:25-37 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on July 14, 2019*

I.

About 12 years ago, a man named Wesley Autrey became a national hero. You might remember the remarkable story about Wesley, a construction worker with two young daughters who lived in New York City. One day Wesley and his girls were standing on the subway platform waiting for a train when another man on the platform just down the way suffered a seizure, stumbled, and fell off the platform down to the subway tracks below. At that moment, the headlights from an incoming train flashed upon them, and without a moment to lose, Wesley jumped onto the tracks to rescue the man by dragging him out of the way of the train. Almost immediately, though, he realized the train was too close and moving too fast for him to do that. Wesley pressed the man down in the hollow space between the tracks, then flattened his own body over the man. The train so narrowly missed Wesley, that he had grease marks on his toboggan. When the train finally stopped Wesley hollered up to the frightened onlookers on the platform who had taken notice with great fear. "There are two little girls up there," he said. "Let them know their Daddy is OK."

The headlines write themselves, don't they? "Harlem Hero," one said. "The Subway Superman," said another. And one even went to the Bible: "Good Samaritan Saves Man on Subway Tracks."

It makes sense, doesn't it? For people were so moved by Wesley's compassion, so stirred by his selfless response, so taken with his courage. It

seemed that the nation collectively wondered, “if that had been me, would I have done that? If that’s what a Good Samaritan is supposed to be and do, could I ever be one?”¹

II.

It’s a familiar story we have set before us today, this parable of the Good Samaritan. For many of us, it recalls heroic moments like Wesley’s, moments that call us to the very best of who we are, moments that for some of us, to be honest, seem to guilt us into thinking that this is how we should be responding to all things all the time. And particularly for a story as well-worn as this one, one that makes headlines and Bible story greatest hits lists, we must hear it anew to keep ourselves from getting stuck in the same familiar ruts on the road of understanding.

“Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus,” Luke tells us, immediately prompting a collective eye roll from the modern reader. “Lawyers!,” right? Always with a question or a test. Always trying to dig in and pick apart the contours of an argument. Always trying to figure out the limits of the law, the farthest reach demanded by the governing document under question.

But before we start throwing stones at lawyers, let’s take a closer look at this one, because he helps us make sense of the parable. A more comprehensive translation of the Greek here would call him a legal expert or scribe, one who would have known Mosaic law inside and out, one who had studied his Torah dutifully. So what’s his story? In scripture study, one of the first questions to bring to a text is its context: where the characters are physically located, what is happening before and after the story, who these

¹ Story shared by Tom Long in his sermon “Meeting the Good Samaritan,” July 15, 2001, http://day1.org/1051-meeting_the_good_samaritan.

folks are in a broader environment in which they interact. So if we trace our way back from Luke 10:25 where we meet the lawyer, the chapter unfolds with the story we talked about last week – the sending of the 70 disciples, Jesus’s reflections, the disciples’ return, and Jesus’s rejoicing of the work of the Holy Spirit in the work of discipleship.

Then in verse 25, our story begins with the lawyer who stood up to test Jesus. So we must ask ourselves: where did the lawyer come from? There’s no story of Jesus teaching to a crowd, no multitude around him on his way. As we trace the context back, we find that the last group surrounding Jesus was the seventy disciples he sent forth into the world. As I’ve worked this week, I’ve found myself wondering: what if the questioning, testing lawyer was a disciple of Jesus just trying to understand more fully this life to which he has been called and sent?² What if, like us, he’s simply reaching to get his faith right, and make sense of these matters of faith? What if this lawyer gives us a glimpse into the face of our discipleship?

“Teacher,” he says to Jesus, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” It’s a robust question from a robust scholar of scripture who wants to understand deeply the nature of life in all its forms. Jesus, understanding his audience and the significance of self-discovery as a tool for learning, reversed the question: “what is written there in the law? How do you understand it?,” to which the lawyer quickly responds as one who knows his source: “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all

² This idea was first sparked by my weekly engagement with the Pulpit Fiction podcast, who wondered aloud about it. You can find that podcast here: <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper10c>. In conversation with my favorite resident New Testament scholar and exegete, Dr. Mary Foskett, she too acknowledged that the original location of the lawyer was a question worth asking of the text.

your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus affirms the lawyer with these words: “do this, and you will live.”

But the lawyer apparently wasn’t satisfied with that answer. There wasn’t enough clarity, enough specificity. “And who is my neighbor?” You can almost hear the subtext in that question, all that lies between those lines, the fine print, the terms and conditions. There within we find the question he doesn’t ask but implies for all of us throughout time and space who wonder the same: “who is **not** my neighbor?” Surely *Jesus doesn’t expect **all** the people to be my neighbor, because that would be ridiculous! No one could possibly do that! So who doesn’t fall into that commandment? When can I be let off the hook? What are the boundaries or reach of neighborliness? Does neighbor only apply to those within my village, my city, my neighborhood, the ones I come into contact with? Surely you just mean those in my faith community or cultural background, right? I want to do this right, I want to minimize the risk that I’ll do it wrong, so define ‘neighbor’ clearly for me, Jesus!*

To which Jesus does what he does best: he reframes the question by telling a story.

“A man went on a journey down the Jericho road,” Jesus begins. This was a dangerous stretch of road, and out from the wilderness, the man was jumped and beaten, robbed and left in a ditch for dead.

First came a priest who passed him by. *Can you blame him?*, the lawyer may have wondered. *I mean, he has things to do! That priest has the Temple to visit, scripture to study, lessons to prepare, meetings to lead, people to see. He knew that interacting with a broken body like the man’s would violate Jewish*

purity laws and make him ritually unclean. Can you blame the guy?; it's no wonder he didn't stop.

Then came a Levite who passed him by. *That makes sense too, the lawyer may have thought. That Levite is a smart one; he knows that this could have been a trap set by the robbers to get others to stop as easy victims. But he cares about matters of justice. He could have been headed to a meeting of the Jericho Road Task Force to figure out how to make this path more safe. Yes, that makes sense.*

“But a Samaritan while traveling came near him and when he saw the man, he was moved with pity,” Jesus says, and then the lawyer and everyone in earshot of this story would have stiffened. For the enmity that existed between Jews and Samaritans was entrenched and bitter, hot with anger handed down from father to son and son to daughter for generations, as sure as their birthright. The origin of that anger isn't entirely clear, but no matter — there was no love lost either way between Jews and Samaritans. So thorough was their separation from one another, hearing about a Samaritan and Jew would be as provocative and scandalous to Jesus's hearers then as now imagining a 9/11 survivor near death but saved by a member of Al Quaida, or a transgender man near death but saved by a homophobic woman, or a far-right Republican near death but saved by a far-left Democrat, an ICE agent near death but saved by a Latina immigrant, a resurgent KKK member near death but saved by an African-American who lived through Jim Crow. Each a relationship of such distance drawn together by need and response.

For that's just it, isn't it? The man in the ditch — the only one in this story unidentified by his race or religion or professional class — is simply one

in need. And at the end of the day, are not we all one who is in need? Are we not all ones that at some point in our life become like the man in the subway or in the ditch in need of saving? Is our suffering not the very thing that binds us up to one another despite all the odds? Isn't that how we discover our neighbors and become a neighbor too?

Debie Thomas says this: "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 tribalisms 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, whose politics you agree with. [I'd add – what matters is not how you parse a legal answer or wrestle with a particular question.] What matters is whether or not anyone will stop to show you mercy before you die."³

"Which of the three was a neighbor to the man?," Jesus asks.

And when all the questions had fallen away, the answer was simple: "the one who showed him mercy."

"So do this – love God with all you have, love your neighbor as yourself, be neighborly and receive neighborliness, **do love**,"⁴ Jesus says, "**and you shall live!**"

May it be so! Amen.

³ With gratitude to Debie Thomas for her beautiful quote and essay on the Good Samaritan passage that deeply illuminated my work this week! You can find it here: <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2276>.

⁴ I also took great interest this week in Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon "Do Love" from *The Preaching Life*, p114.

