

“Who is my neighbor?” Such a simple question, isn’t it? If I were to ask you, what is the meaning of the parable of the Good Samaritan in a single sentence, I bet that we’d all answer more or less in the same way. What would that be? You can say it. Be merciful. When given the opportunity to help someone in need, you should. Am I missing anything? That’s the problem with this story. We think we know what it means already, a simple moral lesson that Jesus tells us to go and do. Just be merciful. End of sermon, right?

Not quite. That which appears simple is often the hardest to understand, much less do. To see with new eyes, let’s consider the context of this parable for a moment. This story is a response to a question, “Teacher, what must I do to gain eternal life?” That word, “gain” is also translated, “inherit.” The question shows us where the legal expert is coming from. He thinks eternal life is something we earn by how we act, so just give me the answer, Jesus, and I’ll do it. But it’s not that simple. Eternal life is not something that’s gained or inherited, nor is it something that begins when we die as the parable demonstrates. It’s a gift we receive from God, and gifts, by definition, are never earned. We can see up front that this man, like most of us, doesn’t understand grace. Grace means that life is a gift from God, one that we neither choose nor earn, but instead receive with gratitude. To misunderstand this, is to misunderstand everything.

To help him see clearly, Jesus engages in Socratic dialogue, answering the question with another question, “What is written in the law?” The man responds with the two greatest commandments: love God and love your neighbor. Ding, ding, ding! Jesus says, in the end, it’s really that simple, or as I often end our services, “It’s all that easy, and it’s all that hard.” And the story could have ended here, but this guy couldn’t help himself. He needed to prove that he was right, or as other translations put it, he wanted to justify himself, and he is not alone. We all want to justify ourselves, to prove that we are good enough, that we are worthy, that we deserve the accolades of God and our fellow humans. Some of us spend our lives trying to prove we are right, that we are OK, that we deserve to be here, but this is a fool’s errand. Like life itself, justification is a gift from God that cannot be earned. Grace means that we don’t need to justify ourselves to God or to anyone else and trying to do so actually harms ourselves and others. Another word for that is sin. When we try to earn what God gives us freely, it only creates suffering. It makes us anxious, insecure, and arrogant people, while God wants us to be peaceful, secure, and humble. How do we become those kinds of people? That’s what this story is about.

A man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho is mugged, beaten, and left for dead. A priest walks by, sees the man, crosses over to the other side, and goes on his way. Next up a Levite. He too sees the injured man, crosses over to the other side, and leaves. These two should know better. They are the spiritual leaders of Israel, the people we should be able to look to as examples of God’s love, yet they fail. Then comes the third. As listeners, who do we expect the third person to be who? A Jew—obviously. Someone like the legal expert who knows the Bible and wants to inherit eternal life. But Jesus pulls the rug out under us and says it’s a Samaritan who came along and did what was right.

Jews and Samaritans didn’t like each other very much. This may strike us as odd because they had so much in common. Samaritans descend from the northern tribes of Israel, while the Jews from the southern tribes. Though they squabbled about scripture and tradition, they believed in the same God. They were effectively siblings. So, why all the animosity? I think the

best answer may be to look at your own family. Where does the most anger, animosity, and hurt come from in our lives: strangers on the street, or from our own family? Jesus tells a story that goes right to the heart of our family wounds and invites us to experience love there.

What makes the Samaritan different? In the final speech of his life, on April 3, 1969, hours before he was assassinated, Dr. King spoke of this parable. He noted that the road between Jerusalem and Jericho was known to be a place where robbers often lied in wait. King suggests that upon seeing the beaten man, the priest and Levite ask themselves, “‘If I stop and help this man, what will happen to me?’” But then the Good Samaritan came by. And he reversed the question, ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’” King says this is the key, are we concerned only with ourselves, or are we concerned with the plight of others? Far be it from me to ever disagree with Dr. King, but I want to look at his first question and reverse it as well. Instead of asking, “‘If I stop and help this man, what will happen to me?’” we should ask, “‘If I don’t stop and help this man, what will happen to me?’”

What this parable does is it invites us to see ourselves in the face of the other, to break down the distinctions between the subject and object, good and bad, friends and enemies, to see ourselves as inextricably bound together, whether we know it or not, to see the world with a unitive, non-dual awareness. Perhaps the problem with the priest and the Levite is not that they are selfish. Perhaps the problem is how they understand the self. The priest and Levite see the beaten man as someone separate, when in fact, their lives are bound together. To leave the man in need isn’t selfish, as much as foolish and shortsighted. Because whether you know it or not, you are the man in the ditch, and he is you. To not help him is to not help yourself. We are not separate, autonomous beings. What happens to one of us, affects all of us, enemies and friends alike.

Remember how I asked you at the beginning, what the meaning of this parable is in one sentence, and we agreed that when given the opportunity, we should help those in need. The reason we all think that is because we are used to seeing ourselves from the perspective of those who have power and agency. We automatically see ourselves in the priest, Levite, or the Samaritan. But there’s a fourth character in this story, and we need to see ourselves in him as well. What if instead of seeing ourselves in the person with power and agency, we see ourselves as the one in need? Then we might say the meaning of the parable is, “‘help may come to you from the most unlikely places, even from your enemies.’” At Jesus’ table, enemies are welcome. Otherwise, there would be no room for us. The enemy isn’t out there somewhere, in someone else. The enemy is also right here, and Jesus welcomes that part of you too. Can we learn to do the same for that part of ourselves and for others? Until we can see ourselves not merely as those in a position to help but also as those who have needs, until we can see the godness in our enemies and recognize that we sometimes are the enemy, we’ll never understand grace.

Mr. Rogers once said, “‘All of us, at some time or other, need help. Whether we’re giving or receiving help, each one of us has something valuable to bring to this world. That’s one of the things that connects us as neighbors—in our own way, each one of us is a giver and a receiver.’” He knew a thing or two about what it means to be a neighbor. The only way we can offer help without judgment is if we first learn to receive it. Most of us have been trained to think that needing help is shameful, yet we need far more help than we are prepared to admit. Our needs are greater than we know, our wounds deeper than we recognize. And Jesus has

come near to all who are in the ditch. He has become one with us in it. Jesus knows what it's like to be beaten and left for dead, he knows what it means to love his enemies, and he knows how to help us in our need. For it is only the wounded who can heal.

The way we become peaceful, secure, and humble people is by understanding that you don't need to justify yourself to God or others. The gift you're seeking to earn is yours already. Your life is a gift, one that you neither created nor earned. Your purpose is to see yourself in other people, all people, enemies, friends, the powerful and the needy, and to help each on the way home. That's what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves, you are in them, and they in you—all givers and all receivers. Go and do likewise.