

The One Who Showed Mercy

Text: Luke 10:23-37

Hymn: "Jesus, Thy Boundless Love to Me" (LSB 683)

I will protect their identities (they know who they are), but a few years ago a couple in this church gave me a book entitled *Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar....*

Written by two philosophy majors, the book teaches philosophy through jokes.

Here's an example:

A man writes a letter to the IRS saying, "I have been unable to sleep knowing that I have cheated on my income tax. I have understated my taxable income and have enclosed a check for \$150. If I still can't sleep, I will send the rest."¹

The joke, the authors tell us, helps illustrate emotivism: An ethical approach based not on objective right or wrong but on how an action makes one feel. If the man can sleep after paying just a part of what he actually owes, nothing wrong with keeping the rest.

In a similar vein, a famous comedian used to tell on himself how every time he sees a soldier on a plane, he thinks, "You know what? I should give him my seat. It would be the right thing to do. It would be easy to do, and it would mean a lot to him. After all, why should I be in first class and he in coach when he's giving his life for the country?" But the comedian goes on to say, "I have never done that. I've never done it once. I've had so many opportunities, and I never even really seriously came close. And here's the worst part: I still just enjoy the fantasy for myself. I am actually proud of myself for having thought of it...I am such a sweet man, I think. That is so nice of me to think of doing that and then totally never do it."

¹ *Plato and Platypus Walk into a Bar...*, Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klein (New York, NY: Penguin, 2008), p. 87.

In this case, merely thinking about doing good makes us feel good about yourself and that's good enough, right? And the crowd laughs, and maybe we laugh, because the comedian, by saying out loud something we know to be true but would hardly ever admit, has given us permission to laugh at ourselves, at our own foolishness, perhaps even at our own sinfulness.

So, here's just one more joke. A priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan are traveling on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. Wait, that's not a joke. It's a story told by Jesus. And the parable is told to answer one little question, Who is my neighbor?

Who is my neighbor? According to the reluctant taxpayer and the frequent flyer comedian, the answer would be, Whoever gives me an opportunity to make me feel good about myself. The neighbor is there to serve *my* needs; and if he doesn't, he isn't my neighbor (at least not in that moment).

So, the priest is on his way to Jerusalem. We're probably justified in imagining him as going there to serve in the temple. But to touch a man who may turn out to be dead would render him unclean for the performance of his service. And so he steers clear and walks on the other side of the road. This wounded man doesn't serve the needs of the priest. In fact, the wounded man would ruin the priest's day by making him unfit for service in God's temple.

Next, a Levite happens by, also on his way to Jerusalem. An expert on the written law but not so good with application. He also stays clear. Why have his world of ideals shattered by getting his hands dirty with actual mercy? This beaten man might make him late for a very valuable theological debate on a part of the Torah to which he's

eager to share his unique insight. Surely, he's needed more in Jerusalem than on the side of the road tending to the health and well-being of this stranger.

Finally, a Samaritan comes by. He shows compassion. And that compassion gets a full description: He binds up the man's wounds, he gives him a ride on his own animal, he takes him to an inn, continues to care for him, and pays the bill.

The Samaritan is the punchline to the parable. The big Aha! The surprise! For Samaritans are the lowest of the low. Traitors. Unclean. In whose eyes? Certainly in the eyes of the priest and the Levite who passed by. And certainly to the lawyer to whom Jesus is telling this parable. And yet this hated outsider is the one who does the right thing. And he does it so completely.

Jesus wants to make sure the lawyer understands; so, he asks the simple question, "Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" And did you catch how the lawyer responds? Notice that he doesn't say, "The Samaritan." No, he says, "the *one* who showed him mercy." Is it just me or do you detect in that roundabout "the one who showed him mercy" a still lingering pride in the heart of the lawyer? He can't even bring himself to say "Samaritan."

Significant or not, the lawyer got it right. The one who proved to be a neighbor was the one who showed compassion. But now the hard part, the very clear application of the parable: "Go and do likewise."

"Who is my neighbor?" That's the question posed by the lawyer at the beginning of the story. "Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor?" That's the question posed by Jesus at the end of the story. And like the most effective joke or a deep philosophical insight, it flips the original question on its head. The answer to who

is my neighbor is not about who the neighbor is at all or how that person makes you feel. It's about *being* a neighbor. Who is my neighbor? That is the question. The answer? Be one! Be a neighbor. And the most powerful way to be a neighbor is by exercising compassion.

It doesn't matter what you call yourself—a priest, a Levite, a Samaritan, a Christian, a Lutheran—if you fail to show compassion to those in need, you are not being a neighbor as defined by the second greatest commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself!” The priest loved himself but didn't extend that love to his neighbor. He wasn't neighborly. The Levite loved himself but didn't extend that love to his neighbor. He wasn't neighborly. The Samaritan loved his neighbor so completely we can reason that this is how he would have treated himself and so loved his neighbor in the same way. He was a neighbor by exercising total compassion on someone in need. And it didn't matter at all who the someone was.

Who does that sound like? Who shows neighborliness in the way of total compassion on those in need? Of whom is it said that “When [he] saw [a bereaved mother], his heart went out to her” and he raised her son? (Lk 7:11-17) Of whom is it reported that he once reached out his hand to a leper, touched him and healed him? (Lk 5:13) That he touched the eyes of two blind men and restored their sight? (Mt 9:27-31) That he said, “I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way”? (Mt 15:32) That he announced, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”? (Mt 11:28) And that while dying prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know what they do” (Lk 23:34).

Who is this who proved to be a neighbor over and over again? It is, of course, Jesus. St. John tells us, “God is love.” And St. Paul writes, “God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Jesus did not ask who are you and then decide whether or not you should be his neighbor. And why would He? You’re a sinner! He chose to be a neighbor to you despite who you are. That’s who He is. And God in Christ being love Himself was a neighbor to each and every one of us in the most profound way: He bound the wounds of your sin and paid for your eternal healing at the price of His own life. To show the complete compassion and love of God to you He shed His blood for you on the Cross.

Think about every story you have heard or learned from the Bible and all the characters and now ask the question that Jesus asked the lawyer, Which of these many characters proved to be a complete neighbor to sinners? The answer: The One—capital “O”—who showed mercy. Jesus, the One through whom God reconciled the world to himself, not counting men’s sins against them. The One who knew no sin but whom God made to be sin for our sake, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. And now think about this world full of sinners in need of that compassion. Maybe they are in your family. Maybe they live next door or go to school with you or work with you or maybe you haven’t even met them yet. And guess what? Jesus Christ, who is your greatest neighbor, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, has some work for you. You know who He is for you. And here is what He has to say: “Go and do likewise.” Be a neighbor. Be neighborly with the compassion and mercy of Jesus Christ. For that is what He would have you do—yes, do!—love one another as God has loved you. In the name of Jesus. Amen.