

“And who is my neighbor?” Part of me feels like I could pick right back up where I left off last week! Who is my neighbor? Gay, Christian, homeless, Muslim, whoever - that’s my neighbor! And what are we supposed to do? Love your neighbor! Seriously, I could preach that every Sunday to the end of time, and we’d still have work to do. Love your neighbor! It almost seems like Jesus wants us to pay attention to this one. Love your neighbor. Only, today, Jesus asks us something a little different. It’s not just love your neighbor, it’s show your neighbor mercy. Mercy, kindness, care, generosity, unreasonable and heroic love that goes far beyond what’s expected of us. Except, of course, with Jesus, far beyond what’s expected of us is exactly what’s expected of us.

But let’s take a second and back up. I want to look at some details about the cast of characters here. It can be helpful to imagine ourselves in each of the different roles in the parables and see just how familiar or foreign each part feels. And of course, just what exactly I need to look at in myself when I really connect with the victim or the villain or even the ineffective cameo. Ok, so to start off, we’ve got “A man.” In the parables, that means a Jewish man, a relatively average person, neither rich nor poor, neither ruler nor leper. Just a dude. I actually think that, when there’s a relatively nondescript character, it’s pretty likely that that’s where we’re most likely to fit ourselves in. So, you and I are walking down the road, and a band of robbers attacks. No way we could ever be those robbers, right? Right? File that one away for another time.

We’re left in the ditch in a real bad way, and along comes a priest. Well, that’s pretty easy for me to imagine. And I know some of y’all’ll have a vivid idea of what it means to be a priest after the ways you’ve stepped up this year. So there we are, priests now, and there’s a beat-up everyman lying in the ditch, but for whatever reason we can’t be bothered to stop. After the priest, a Levite walks by. Levites are sort of like permanent acolytes that come into the gig just by virtue of who they were born to. So, we’re a procession of holies, and not only do none of us give the fella in the ditch a second look, but we cross the street when we see him lying there. Now there are some people who try to make the holies look less bad here by saying they were bound by the purity laws and couldn’t touch a dead body (which assumes they thought the ditch dude was dead), or that they were hurrying to get to services on time (which assumes the parable takes place on a service day, which Jesus doesn’t say anything about). But here’s the thing. That attempt to explain away the negligence of the faith leaders ignores a pretty important detail, the detail that the purity laws do not apply when it’s a matter of life and death. That’s a very important exception for moments exactly like this. No way we could ever be those negligent holy folks, right? Right? We’ll file that one away for another time, too.

Along comes a Samaritan, and he saves the day! We’re the Samaritan, right? Yeah, that feels good, so it must be true. Now we can dust off our hands, pat ourselves on the back, and get on with things, right? Right? You ever wondered who the Samaritans were? And why, exactly, Jesus chose a Samaritan to be the good guy? Quick history lesson: way back, almost 600 years earlier, Israel itself was made of two Kingdoms, the North and the South. Each was conquered in turn. The Northern Kingdom fell first, and its capital -- Samaria -- served as a warning to the Southern Kingdom. One day, you could end up like the Samaritans, and all that you hold dear will be lost. When the Northern Kingdom fell, though, they were essentially just invaded. Yes, they lost control and yes things were hard for them. Foreign peoples came in and brought with them their gods, and the Samaritans circled their theological wagons. They drew hard lines defining what it meant to be Jewish and they risked quite a lot in doing so. In time, the warnings from the North did little good, and a long line of ineffectual kings gave way to invasion in the South, this time from the mighty Babylonian empire. The Babylonians did things a little differently. Not only did they conquer, but once they had won soundly, they sent the people into

exile. And for several generations, the people of the Southern Kingdom now lived -- and tried to be faithful -- spread thin across the breadth of the ever-expanding empire. But eventually, they were allowed to return home. And when they did, they regrouped in the South, shared their stories, and brought their diasporic religion back together. They had done their best, too, to keep Judaism going, but in a strange land, that sometimes meant knowingly or unknowingly allowing outside influences to creep in.

By the time Jesus comes around, the Samaritans in the northern part of Israel and the rest of the Jews in the rest of Israel found themselves living out a very similar faith in very different ways. Effectively, the minority Samaritans thought the majority rest of the Jews had been unfaithful in the face of persecution and came out of the ordeal with a watered down version of the true faith. And the rest of the Jews thought the Samaritans had come out as weirdly hardline extremists, literalists, inflexible and incapable of understanding or at least unwilling to try. In other words, they were enemies. Hyper-conservative originalists versus flexible realists. No way we could ever be either of those, right? Right? File that one away for another time, yet again.

So who's in the ditch? A Jew. And who helps the gravely injured man? A Samaritan. This is blue versus gray, east versus west, Russian versus Ukrainian, enemy versus enemy. The stranger who helps the everyman is not just a random member of a different group. It's the guy you see on the news holding up nasty protest signs at funerals. It's the slimy talking head on TV that makes your blood boil everytime you even hear mention of their name. It's the politician that seems hell-bent on ruining everyone else's lives just out of their own meanness. If you're the one lying in the ditch, what does it mean to you, what does it change in you, what does it do to your entire understanding of how the world works when the hand that reaches out to save you is the hand of your gravest enemy? If you watch Fox News, what if that hand belongs to AOC? And if you watch The Daily Show, what if that hand belongs to Ted Cruz?

Now in some ways, it's easier to imagine ourselves being the one in the ditch. We're the ones that get attacked, we're the ones that need help, we're the ones that get challenged and have to do some soul searching. But what does it mean if we're the Samaritan? Well, sure, that's tempting, too, to imagine ourselves not as the robbers or the passersby, but as the heroes? Yeah, that feels nice. But remember all that historical and present-tense baggage? That person in the ditch isn't just a stranger. It's a stranger with a MAGA hat or a Feel the Bern t-shirt. Most of us -- maybe that's not fair -- I would likely feel at least a moment of schadenfreude. From there, maybe I'd help? I like to think I would. But I can't promise that. I might pretend like I didn't see anything. Or maybe I'd be worried for my own safety. Or maybe I'd look around and try to figure out how things got this bad while ignoring his groans from the gutter. I know what I'm supposed to do. I'm supposed to stop, bandage him, take him to a safe place, pay his expenses while he recovers, and come back to check on him. That's what I'm *supposed* to do. But is it *what* I'd do?

I guess in all this, one of the things that remains a mystery to me is why Jesus used the word "mercy." Not love, which we really dig, but mercy. Mercy can mean a lot of things, particularly action guided by compassion, but in the Bible it often comes with a sense of forgiveness or setting aside wrongs. Like, when we ask for mercy, we're not just asking for someone to go easy on us, we're asking for someone to go easy on us because 1) there's a power differential and 2) we've done something wrong and need forgiveness. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the power differential is upside-down, meaning the usually powerless Samaritan has the choice to help or not to help. The mercy here goes beyond compassion, it sets aside grave differences and shines light on two human beings dealing with a crisis. Or rather, compassion itself shines so greatly that difference means nothing in the face of crisis. There is no moment in this parable where the Samaritan asks himself what the man in the ditch would do if their places were reversed. It's pure humanity. Pure love. Pure mercy.

This all started with a tricky lawyer type trying to trip up Jesus. Love God, love your neighbor. That's the crux of our faith. But who is our neighbor? Jesus says, "the one who shows mercy." Y'all. Not the one we

give mercy to, but the one who is merciful. It does not matter for one moment who that merciful person is or what they believe. That's our neighbor. And that's the person we're supposed to act like. At least, that's the action we're supposed to live out. Love God. Love your neighbor. But who is our neighbor? The one who shows mercy. Forgive beyond difference, love beyond borders, and care for all that are hurting. Love God. Love your neighbor. Have mercy.