THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN AS AN EXAMPLE STORY

Luke 10:25-37

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In the Spring of 1981, when I was a student at Harding Graduate School of Religion, I took a class taught by Philip Slate entitled "Expository Preaching." It was an excellent class. Now, it was quite common on tests for Slate to give you, the student, a list of items to be identified. The items may have been a name, the title of a book, a phrase, a technical term, a geographic location, or something of this sort. You were suppose to identify the item by writing two or three sentences about it. On one of the tests, an item to be identified was the name "Adolf Jülicher." I didn't have a clue about who this fellow was. So I wrote, "He was a German theologian and expositor." I'll never forget the note Slate wrote on my test paper (in red ink, of course): "A good guess for a name like this on a test like this. 0 points." Since that time, I have remembered that Adolf Jülicher was the German scholar who argued that Jesus' parables were originally intended to illustrate one truth only and that all allegorical features are therefore secondary.

Jülicher's two-volume work (1888, 1889) continues to be the point of departure for the modern study of the parables. He divided the parables corpus into (1) similitudes (extended comparisons based on repeatable typical events–e.g., Luke 15:8-9, "The Lost Coin"), (2) parables (where some interesting particular situation is in view–e.g., Luke 15:11-32, "The Prodigal Son"), and (3) example stories (which, unlike similitudes and parables, are not really about something that lies outside of the literal meaning of the narrative–e.g., Luke 10:30-37, "The Good Samaritan").

To the first-century Jew, the expression "good Samaritan" would have been oxymoronic at best and a contradiction at worst. *Good* Samaritan–there simply was no such creature. Jesus' parable offers a category-shattering answer to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" The double love command, citing Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, enjoins love of God and neighbor (v. 27), but the lawyer presses for a more precise delineation of the term "neighbor"–which in the original context of Leviticus meant "fellow Israelite." Jesus' story about the compassionate Samaritan, however, rather than narrowing down the definition of "neighbor," reshapes the whole issue in two ways: the hated Samaritan becomes included in the category of "neighbor," and the "neighbor" is defined as one who *shows* mercy, rather than *receives* mercy (vv. 36-37).

Since it was a lawyer who provoked this parable, I felt it was appropriate to go to my *Dictionary of Legal Terms*. Interestingly, there is no entry for the term "neighbor"; however, there is an entry for the term "Good Samaritan." A "Good Samaritan" is

> one who renders voluntary aid without compensation to a person who is injured or in danger. There is no requirement to intervene; however, if one chooses to be a Good Samaritan, one may face liability if reasonable care is not exercised and the rescued party is further injured. Various state statutes may provide limited levels of immunity from lawsuits for the rescuer.

American jurisprudence, which relies heavily upon the principle of precedent, recognizes and understands what a "Good Samaritan" is. Generally speaking, even the biblically illiterate know what is meant by the expression "Good Samaritan." The term is found in *Webster's Dictionary*, indicative of the fact that it is used in contemporary society to denote "anyone who pities or helps another or others unselfishly."

This parable of Jesus provides the paradigm, it provides *the* example of a Good Samaritan. The Samaritan is presented as a model to be followed. How is this done?

The story uses several narrative techniques. There is conflict between the robbers and the victim, and contrast between the priest and Levite on the one hand and the Samaritan on the other. The motif of testing enters the story when the injured and helpless man in the middle of the road becomes a test of the humanitarian compassion of all who will travel the road. There is climax in the story, based on the folk-tale motif of threefold repetition. In this case, the Samaritan's actions assume greater force because of the two previous refusals to offer aid. Also, the appearance of the Samaritan in the third position on the list was an unexpected role-reversal for Jesus' audience, which was accustomed to thinking in categories of priest, Levite, and Israelite; instead of–as we have in the parable–priest, Levite, and Samaritan. Yet another literary ingredient of the story is satire, here an attack on the ecclesiastical elite of Jesus' day.

In the story, the role of the priest and Levite is to raise hopes and then to dash them. The doubling heightens the effect, but the hearer is less surprised the second time round. Notice how a set of chain linkages are created between the characters by using shared verbs in connection with adjacent characters as they appear on the scene: the man who falls among robbers and the priest were both "going down"; the priest and the Levite both "passed by on the other side"; the Levite and the Samaritan both "came." Priest, Levite, and Samaritan will all "see" the wounded man. When we come to "he had compassion" (v. 33), we reach the fulcrum upon which the entire story turns. The word ἐσπλαγχνίσθη is reserved until the final position in the clause to build suspense and to allow maximum impact. It is the Samaritan–the Samaritan, of all people!–who has compassion for the needy victim.

Thomas Long, in his book *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*, does not employ the terminology of "example story"; instead, he speaks of "vessel parables." In example stories or vessel parables one device used to highlight the central truth being taught is that the parable is constructed to provide what is technically called "end stress," an emphasis upon the final episode and its implied meaning. A parable built this way will typically have a series of episodes. In the first episode something happens; in the following episodes similar events occur. Only in the final episode does anything different happen, and this is where the rhetorical spotlight falls. The parable of the Good Samaritan is designed this way. A priest comes down the road, and he passes by the man in the ditch. Next, a Levite comes down the road, and he too passes the man by. Only when the Samaritan arrives does the action change, and it is here we

learn what it means to be a neighbor. The spotlight falls on the Samaritan, and he is presented as the example of what it means to be a neighbor. The rhetorical impact of an example story or vessel parable is pedagogical: it teaches and illustrates a single truth. We respond, "Aha, I see the point!"

Since the parable depends for its effect on the sequential unfolding of the action, it must be understood in its context and this means giving attention to the questions of v. 25 and v. 29 and to Jesus' application in vv. 36-37. We read that "a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'" This frame shows that the parable arose from the heat of controversy. When Jesus tells the story of the Samaritan, he answers the exact question of the lawyer very precisely, for the parable does, in fact, emphasize doing.

Jesus responds to the lawyer's question by affirming the efficacy of the Old Testament "law of love" as the right way to attain spiritual life (vv. 26-28). We read further that the lawyer wanted to "justify himself," and his additional question is the one that prompts the parable: "And who is my neighbor?" (v. 29). The parable that follows is a literary definition of "neighbor."

Precise realism underlies the story. The violent action with which the narrative begins would not have been unexpected in Jesus' day, since lone travelers from Jerusalem to Jericho were easy victims for robbers. There is even a touch of geographic realism in the statement that the man went "down" from Jerusalem to Jericho (v. 30), since the trip did involve a literal descent in altitude. Similar realism underlies the account of a priest going "down" the same route as the victim had taken. Why the priest, and then the Levite, did not help the injured man we are not told. The *why* is unimportant; it is the *fact* of their refusal that is significant. Of course, in the absence of such information, many have felt compelled to offer an answer. Pertaining to this issue of "why," A. M. Hunter makes this insightful comment: "We do not know. What we do know is that, human nature being what it is, good reasons have a way of presenting themselves when we are faced with a distasteful duty."

In the final phase of the action, moral behavior comes from the least likely person, a Samaritan. It is significant that the Samaritan is first said to have "had compassion" (v. 33) and then to have cared for the physical needs of the man. This detail focuses attention on the inner attitude that leads to good moral action. The compassionate acts that the Samaritan undertakes for the injured man are told in such detail (vv. 34-35) that they heighten the contrast between the Samaritan and the two religious officials.

Jesus clinches the point of the parable by returning to the context out of which the story grew. He asks the lawyer, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" (v. 36). The bigoted Jewish lawyer cannot bring himself to use the despised word "Samaritan," so he replies, "The one who showed him mercy" (v. 37). Jesus responds, "Go and do likewise" (v. 37). This command, which cannot be evaded, shows that the parable has been an example story in which a model character has been held up as a pattern for others to follow.

Now, how do we apply this parable as an example story to contemporary situations? Allow me to offer one such usage of what seems to me to be a responsible and thought-provoking application of this parable to a sensitive and controversial modern-day problem. In his book, *The Moral Vision of the New*

Testament, Richard Hays tackles the thorny issue of abortion. Following a brief summary and explanation of the parable of the Good Samaritan, he writes this paragraph:

> How does this story illuminate the issue of abortion? The point is not that the unborn child is by definition a "neighbor." Rather, the point is that we are called upon to *become* neighbors to those who are helpless, going beyond conventional conceptions of duty to provide life-sustaining aid to those whom we might not have regarded as worthy of our compassion. Such a standard would apply both to the mother in a "crisis pregnancy" and to her unborn child. When we ask, "Is the fetus a person?" we are asking the same sort of limiting, self-justifying question that the lawyer asked Jesus: "Who is my neighbor?" *Jesus, by answering the lawyer's question with this parable, rejects casuistic attempts to circumscribe our moral concern by defining the other as belonging to a category outside the scope of our obligation.* To define the unborn child as a nonperson is to narrow the scope of moral concern, whereas Jesus calls upon us to widen it by showing mercy and actively intervening on behalf of the helpless. The Samaritan is a paradigm of love that goes beyond ordinary obligation and thus *creates* a neighbor relation where none existed before. The concluding word of the parable addresses us all: "Go and do likewise." What would it mean for our decisions about abortion if we did indeed take the Samaritan as a paradigm?

The parable of the Good Samaritan. What does it mean for our lives–our decisions and our duties–if we take the Samaritan as an example to be followed?

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