

An elderly couple had just learned how to send text messages on their cell phones. The wife was a romantic type and the husband was a no-nonsense kind of guy. One afternoon the wife went out to meet a friend for coffee. She decided to send her husband a romantic text message and she wrote: "If you are sleeping, send me your dreams. If you are laughing, send me your smile. If you are eating, send me a bite. If you are drinking, send me a sip. If you are crying, send me your tears. I love you." The husband texted back to her: "I'm in the bathroom. Please advise."

The Good Samaritan is one of the best-loved parables of Jesus, and it is unique to Luke's gospel. The lawyer speaks for all of us when he asks: "What should I DO..." He can read the law, he can recite the law, but as for all of us -- the struggle is to do it. He has conceptual knowledge, but he does not have realized understanding. Realized understanding leads to doing. The lawyer is also hampered by 'do to get' thinking. He thinks if he does something, what he does will win him the inheritance of everlasting life. This is a big danger of religion; it's actually a heresy called Pelagianism -- trying to EARN our way into heaven. If I go to Mass every week, if I tithe 10%, if I make a novena, then what do I get? Eternal life we want to hear. But that's not the answer Jesus gives.

The man knows the answer -- it's about love -- and he GIVES the answer. Jesus tells him "DO this and you will live." NOW. Not just in eternity. The way Jesus sees it, there is no gap between the present and the future. The action is its own reward. It is not a matter of doing something and then waiting for the reward, presumably after death. It is a matter of participating in the everlasting life here and now through loving God and neighbor. When the lawyer combines realized understanding and illumined acting, he will be experiencing the everlasting life he so desires. Everlasting life is in the doing. That's how Catherine of Siena could say that "All the way to heaven IS heaven."

The lawyer wants to know who the neighbor is. It's a trap question -- it is meant to lead Jesus into a maze of legal opinions. He wants a narrow definition with clear boundaries and obligations. How little do I HAVE to do in order to get the prize? Sounds like us, right? But don't we all recognize that that's a very sad way to go through life? Never really truly giving, just getting by. When the story begins, he may think he is going to get the small, restrictive answer he wants. The Levite and the priest who saw the robbed and beaten man but passed by may or may not have been justified by the law. They might have been weighing their obligations, entertaining an inner debate about what they had to do or what they were excused from doing. If they touched a bleeding and/or dead body, they would become unclean. And if the man was not a Jew, there was no obligation at all. This fine-print thinking is the air that we so often breathe. But it's the air that shrinks our basic humanity. It suffocates love.

Jesus tells the story to sneak past the lawyer's defenses, to circumvent his tangled legalistic mind. The story uses the classic device of threes to contrast the refusal of the Levite and the priest with the energy and effectiveness of the Samaritan. Both the Levite and priest, knowledgeable in the law, can recite the double commandment. But, like the lawyer himself, neither of them can do it.

What is left is the compassion and creativity of the Samaritan, a picture of a man doing 'love of God and neighbor.' We need to remember that the Samaritan is an enemy of the Jewish man who has been robbed and beaten. In this way this foreigner fulfills the criteria Jesus has insisted on earlier in Luke's gospel: "But I say to you, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for

those who abuse you.” (Lk 6:27-28). Jesus is holding up the foreigner – the enemy – as an example. When people are able to love their enemies, they reveal they have an interior connection to God who provides the strength and direction of their compassion. Without this connection their compassion would be reserved just for family and friends, people who are legal, people we like, people like us. Anyone can do that! But people who are in sync with the God who loves all, love all. “But love your enemies, do good and lend, expecting nothing in return....and you will be children of the Most High; for He is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (Lk 6:35-36) (adapted from John Shea, THE RELENTLESS WIDOW, p. 194-196)

Second, Jesus turned the debate about who is my neighbor on its head. He starts from a different place. “Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the man who was robbed?” Now we are at the heart of the matter. It’s about who we are inside. It is not the outside person and his condition that spurs the action. The robbed and beaten man is the OCCASION, but he is not the cause. The inspiration and creativity comes from the human compassion of the Samaritan that is grounded in GOD’S compassion, for how else would he have been able to love his enemy and produce such an abundance of effective care and goodness?

The lawyer’s simple response shows that he understands the story and its teaching. He describes the neighbor as “the one who shows mercy.” The mercy of the Samaritan is a manifestation, a revelation, a showing of divine mercy. The lawyer’s question has been answered. He has gone beyond hiding behind the law. He now has a realized understanding of how to do love of God and neighbor. There is only thing left, the most important thing – “Go and do likewise.” (Shea, p. 197-198)

Third, this story is a lot more than what it initially seems. As we travel around this world, every man and woman that we meet is the man in the ditch, no matter how little they look it-- and no matter how surprised they might be to realize it. They are all half dying for need of us. In one way or another, every human being is crying out or acting out, or at great cost stifling, their need to be known, accepted, forgiven, healed and loved -- by us, of all people. So that other self who looks so distinct from ourselves is not quite so distinct after all, because they cannot really even BE a self without us. To be really alive, not just half alive, they need our help, our healing.

There seems then to be a deeper and more terrible truth still, because to be really alive, not just half alive, we need to help and heal him: his need for mercy is matched by our need to be merciful. It is not just for his sake that we come to his rescue. It is also for our sakes. None of us can be really human, really alive, without the other; and every time we pass another by and leave him to his own misery, we both suffer for it. We need each other so infinitely more than we are usually apt to see or to admit that we see.

The Samaritan looked, really looked, and saw not just a man, but saw what was actually sprawled out there in the dust with most of the life beaten out of him. He bound up his wounds, set him on his own beast, took care of him, and his reward was to go down in fame as the GOOD Samaritan, which seems to be a marvelously inept title somehow, because just as I prefer to think of the priest and the Levite as less than really bad, more just half blind, in the same way I prefer to think of the Samaritan as more than merely good. I prefer to think that the difference between the Samaritan and the other two was not just that he was more morally sensitive than they were but that he had, as they had not, the eye of a poet or a child or a saint – an eye that was able to look at the man in the ditch and see in all its extraordinary unexpectedness the truth itself, which was that at the deepest level of their being, he and that other one there were not entirely separate selves at all. Not really at all. That other man is me.

Your life and my life flow into each other as wave flows into wave, and unless there is peace and joy and freedom for you, there can be no real peace or joy or freedom for me. To see reality – not as we expect it to be – but as it is – is to see that unless we live for each other and in and through each other, we do not really live life at all. There can really be life only where there really is, in just this sense, love. This is not just the way things ought to be. Most of the time it is not the way we want things to be, because we have been sculpted from our earliest days to think that we are independent, and completely free to do whatever we want. But we are connected, by God's good design. It is the way things are. And not for one instant do I believe that it is by accident that it is the way things are. That would be quite an accident.

As surely as a sailing ship is made to sail with the wind, so are you and I and everybody else in this wide world over made to live bound to each other as a brother is bound to a brother, giving and receiving mercy, binding up each other's wounds, taking care of each other. If we really look at our own lives, seeing not what we expect them to be, but what they are, we cannot help seeing that. It need not have been so. It can be imagined otherwise. We might have been made to live on self-interest or solitude or pure reason. But we were made to love and be connected, and to recognize ourselves too as lying half dead in the ditch.

And once we understand this truth – this truth of our connectedness, we can also understand the command: Go – and do likewise. Amen. (last section adapted from Frederick Buechner, THE MAGNIFICENT DEFEAT, p. 136-144)