

Billie Burke was a famous actress. While she was enjoying a transatlantic trip, she noticed that a gentleman at the next table was suffering from a bad cold. "Are you uncomfortable?" she asked sympathetically. The man nodded. "I'll tell you just what to do for it," she offered. "Go back to your stateroom and drink lots of orange juice. Take 2 aspirins. Cover yourself with all the blankets you can find. Sweat the cold out. I know what I'm talking about. I'm Billie Burke from Hollywood."

The man smiled warmly and introduced himself in return. "Thanks," he said, "I'm Dr. Mayo from the Mayo clinic."

The poor man in today's gospel story could have used both of them to help.....but let's get down to business; there are many layers to this text. A student once asked anthropologist Margaret Mead what she considered to be the first sign of civilization in a society. What separates an uncivilized collection of people from a true civilization? Mead could have mentioned the first signs of tools, like grinding stones or clay pots for holding food and water. She could have mentioned art, like cave paintings or carved statues. Instead, Mead said the first sign of civilization in her opinion was when an ancient skeleton was found with a healed thighbone. Why? It was Mead's estimation that in a competitive, primitive culture where people had to hunt and escape predators in order to survive each day, the fact that someone set aside their own work in order to care for another's injury was a sign of civilization. As Mead explained, 'A broken femur that is healed is evidence that someone has taken time to stay with the one who fell, has bound up the wound, has carried the person to safety and has tended the person through recovery. Helping someone else through difficulty is where civilization starts.' It's also where Christianity starts.

And so our gospel story begins, "On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' "What is written in the Law?" Jesus replied. 'How do you read it?'

We should note how many times in the Bible Jesus answers a question with a question. Martin Copenhaver has written a book titled JESUS IS THE QUESTION. And in this book, he shares a very fascinating fact: He writes: "In the gospels, Jesus asks many more questions than He answers. To be precise, Jesus asks 307 questions. He is asked 183 (questions) of which He only answers 3." (page number not noted)

Jewish teachers often asked their disciples and other teachers, "how do you read it?" (which is to say, understand the teaching of Scripture) as a way to gauge their understanding and to foster conversation and deeper study; they often responded to questions with questions. (CULTURAL BACKGROUND STUDY BIBLE, p. 1784)

The lawyer gives the correct answer and Jesus says "Do this, and you will live." But the lawyer presses Jesus further with another question about who is my neighbor, which prompts the parable of the Good Samaritan. Lots of fun stuff in the details. The man was GOING DOWN from Jerusalem. This is a simple geographic reality – Jerusalem's elevation was higher than Jericho's. He FELL INTO THE HANDS OF ROBBERS. Jericho was a wealthy community and robbers in the hills could readily accost solitary travelers. STRIPPED HIM. Clothing often defined a person's social status. Without his clothes, no one could tell whether the man was poor or rich. Clothing was also a valuable commodity. LEAVING HIM HALF DEAD. Ancient sources employ 'half dead' for one who was, to all appearances, dead. Absolutely and totally dead!

This further explains the passing by on THE OTHER SIDE. People would contract ritual impurity by touching a dead body (which the wounded man appeared to be). According to Jewish tradition, they

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contracted this if so much as their SHADOW touched the body – thus they passed by on the other side. Priests and Levites avoided impurity when possible – though the priest, also “going DOWN” would have completed any duties he may have had in Jerusalem. Many wealthy priests lived in Jericho, so this story rang true to Jesus’ listeners.

A Samaritan who saw him was moved with pity. Jews and Samaritans generally hated each other; while one would not expect most Samaritans to accost Jews (especially on a road largely traveled by Jews), neither would one expect him to help, especially with robbers possibly still around. Some scholars suggest that the Samaritan would not know that the beaten man was Jewish, since he had been stripped of his clothing. On this road, however, the vast majority of travelers would be Jewish, so the wounded man’s Jewishness could probably be assumed.

Finally, the Samaritan offers to repay the innkeeper for whatever more he needed to spend on the man’s care was a financial incentive for the innkeeper to actually do so because innkeepers generally had a reputation as being untrustworthy. (all of these notes from CULTURAL BIBLE, p. 1784)

OK, the details are fun (at least to nerdy priest types)!, but the second point we have to deal with is the problem. When Jesus told this story, His hearers would have been shocked by the conclusion – probably even offended. From the professional religious scholar to whom Jesus addressed this parable in the text, to all in a Jewish audience who overheard Him tell it, the most immediate point of identification in the story would have been the priest and the Levite. Not only were these respected professions in the first century, these people who served in the Temple were for the most part very fine people. Priests were clergy, professional and trained, and given to a life-long calling of service to God and to His people. Levites assisted the priests in the Temple, but were laypeople, volunteers who gave of their time for a rotation of religious duty. Think of these 2 groups as regular army and army national guard. In both cases, they answered a high calling and generally served with distinction and grace. We should resist the notion that the priest and the Levite in this story were hypocrites, or shallow, or unsympathetic human beings.

In fact, there were many reasons to justify their actions, or inaction in this case, with regard to the victim beside the road. First, each one was called to embody a strict code of conduct, in obedience to the Old Testament. That code included keeping oneself undefiled, so that they could represent the people in their work in the Temple. If either man had touched the victim, presuming him to be dead, they would have been ceremonially unclean. There is more at stake for these 2 than the inconvenience of helping the victim. To do so might disqualify them for their calling to God. And besides, this, there are very real issues of safety and common sense. The injured man could have been an accomplice of the robbers, or a mere decoy to attract the next victims. This was a dangerous time and a dangerous road. It is a great disservice to this text to reduce this story to a call to pick up strangers on the side of the road. There are many reasons a good person with good common sense might not stop in this situation.

Which makes the action of the Samaritan all the more remarkable. His action is the one that is not expected. He takes great risks, endures great costs, and goes to great effort to help this stranger. And on top of all that, Jesus delivers the punch line; the caring man is a Samaritan, a person who most Jewish people racially profiled as uncouth, unclean, untrustworthy, and ungodly. If Jesus was telling this story today to us, when ‘Samaritan’ has lost all of its original force in our minds, I wonder who He would cast in the role of this compassionate hero? A Russian soldier? A person in the United States illegally? Or a person drawn from whatever race, class, profession, or religion that is most difficult for us? It’s a truly complex and challenging story when we dig into it a bit.

Third and finally, the story raises the question: “Would we rather be right, or would we rather be right with God?” Would we rather stay antiseptically uninvolved with others who suffer – or would we rather have the compassion of Christ? Would we rather have all the answers, or would we rather have a relationship with the living God – even if that relationship doesn’t answer all of our questions? The expert in the law may have been right, but I suspect he knew he wasn’t right with God. We can come up with a thousand excuses to not help the poor – ‘they’ll just drink or take drugs,’ ‘they’ll just buy cigarettes,’ ‘I was afraid to get near them,’ the list is endless.

We note that Jesus does not try to challenge or change the scribe’s beliefs or knowledge of scripture. But Jesus does turn the question of ‘who is my neighbor?’ into ‘who can I be neighbor to?’ It is a subtle, but critical turn. For as long as we can divide the world into neat categories of neighbors and strangers, people who are legal or illegal, people who ‘deserve’ our help and those who don’t, our neighborly love will always be drawn too small, and we will only put our arms and our hearts – and our generosity – around those who are easiest to love – however we define that. But if we draw the world so that everyone, everywhere, is our neighbor, as Jesus invites us to do in this story, our narrow world-view and restrictive circle of love is challenged. This broad definition of love is not easy, but it is possible if we follow the one who told the parable in the first place, the one who stretched His arms so wide on a cross that it almost tore Him apart.

It is not enough just to believe that we should love the entire world. There is also something to do. It is risky work. And we will almost certainly get dirty and tired – and hurt -- in the process. But love is always worth the risk. This parable is a call to action, not just to pious talk and belief. And there is a non-threatening first step we can all take to get us further along the path of discipleship. We can always give money to those we meet on the street. And I’m talking more than a dollar or 2. Give them enough to get a sandwich and a bottle of water -- \$10- \$20. It’s not going to bankrupt us – but we might have to do without our Grande Macchiato vanilla-caramel latte with whipped cream on top – with non-fat milk of course! -- for a day or two.

We can help in healing of the many broken femurs in our world.

We can fail God by simply doing nothing, risking nothing, in the face of human need. Until the world believes we care, they don’t care what we believe. So, as Jesus said, “Go – and do likewise.” (last 2 points adapted from GRACEWORKS, 10 July 2022, p. 11-12)