

We are so familiar with this parable that it is very difficult for us to actually hear it. We are convinced we already understand it. Our sentimental understanding invites us to look at our busyness, our priorities and values and feel guilty for passing by the homeless man at the freeway exit.

And with the lawyer who steps out of the crowd to test Jesus, we wonder what we should "do" to be good people. Should we give that homeless man cash? Just drive by as if we didn't see him? Or should we go to the grocery store and get him a bag of fruit? Our vague feelings of guilt paralyze us in the face of sorting out these ethical judgments. It's an exercise that begins to look a little like justifying ourselves, explaining ourselves, making ourselves feel better with the stories we've heard of people who supposedly make big bucks holding a sign on the corner.

But as usual this parable is much more complex than our understanding. There's something here much more transformative than just an entreaty to love our neighbor. That's where the lawyer engages him, but not where Jesus leaves him. Like all of Jesus' parables this one is a snare, a trap, whose punchline may still be able to catch *us* in what Jesus is really up to.

The parable as snare is a little like the short stories of Flannery O'Connor. Her first novel, Wise Blood, marked its fiftieth anniversary a couple of months ago. O'Connor was a Catholic woman from Georgia whose commentary on the protestant South was as devastating as it was true.

A Good Man is Hard to Find [is] her most anthologized and debated story. The plot goes like this: a family of four (Mom, Dad, Sis and Brother) driving along with their self-righteous, superficial, tagalong grandmother, get into an accident on a deserted country road. An escaped convict called "the Misfit" happens on the scene with his gang and proceeds to execute each family member, one by one, in the nearby woods. The grandmother is the last to be killed, but before she's shot she tries to save her own life by appealing to the Misfit's belief in God. (Griffith, A Good War is Hard to Find, Godspy.com)

The Grandmother desperately pleads with the killer, revealing her supercilious Christianity mixed with Southern social graces, "You've got good blood! I know you wouldn't shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people! Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady." The Misfit says these famous lines in reply:

“Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead... and he shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything you own and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness.”

“Maybe He didn't raise the dead,” the old lady mumbled . . . “I wasn't there so I can't say He didn't,” The Misfit said. “I wished I had of been there . . . Listen lady, if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now” . . . and the grandmother's head cleared for an instant. “Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!” And then he shot her three times.

This moment of clarity, of mutual recognition is what is happening in the Gospel frame story of the interaction of the lawyer with Jesus. All of his attempts to justify himself fall away and Jesus sees him with the compassion that the Samaritan has for the man who fell among the thieves. At the heart of that compassion is the recognition of this Other as one of our own, as my flesh and blood. The Misfit is not able to sustain this recognition and relieves the tension at its moment of exposure by pulling the trigger. And the self-righteous old woman delivered from her guilt-trip-ridden, sentimental Christianity ends her life with a vision of glory, a vision of relatedness, of belonging and connection to the outcast.

It's a moment of grace and clarity. O'Connor makes the point in an off hand comment by her killer, almost the stories last words: “She would of been a good woman,” The Misfit said, “if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.” Something like this shooting is the function of parable. It clears our head and rips away our protective justifications.

I imagine a contemporary parallel to our parable might go something like this: *An American serviceman separated from his platoon between Faluja and Baghdad fell among insurgents who shamefully stripped him, beat him, and left him for dead in the gutter. A western news reporter going down that road noticed him and passed by on the other side of the street. In the same way a newly appointed member of the Iraqi Council when he came to the place likewise passed by. But an Iraqi detainee just making his escape from Abu Graib came near him; and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. He took him to a western style hotel, paid for his room and secretly gave the concierge money to feed him, protect him, and get him medical help until he was well enough to return to his outfit.*

For us a compassionate terrorist is what a “good” Samaritan was to the hearers of Jesus’ parable: an impossible contradiction. Perhaps his compassion grows out of a common experience of suffering.

The lawyer’s question is a timely one for us: “What are to be the *limits* of my compassion? Who is *not* included among those to whom I owe my love?” Luke’s Jesus has presented a vision of God’s Kingdom characterized by the loving of enemies and doing of good to those who hate us. The lawyer is asking for clarification. It’s a reasonable question really, especially where some of our “neighbors” might turn out to be terrorists. It’s not only a question of personal ethics but of foreign policy, as well. How are we to justify our preventive war on Iraq.

Abu Graib with its “shocking and disgusting” photographs illustrates what Susan Sontag, in a piece she wrote for the Guardian, calls ‘America’s commitment to self-justification.’ She writes, ‘when the president was finally compelled, as the damage to America’s reputation everywhere in the world widened and deepened, to use the “sorry” word, the focus of regret still seemed the damage to America’s claim to moral superiority.’ The President said he was “sorry for the humiliation suffered by the Iraqi prisoners and the humiliation suffered by their families”. But, he went on to say, he was “as equally sorry that people seeing these pictures didn’t understand the true nature and heart of America”.’

Speaking for the nation he’s reframed the lawyer’s question about self-justification: “What must we do to restore our reputation, to win the admiration of the world and the support of the electorate. To convince them of our true goodness?” But beware! This road of self-justification leads to the dehumanization, and ultimately to the violent exclusion of the Other. ‘Americans, too, (continues Sontag) do them (ie. atrocities) when they have permission. When they are told or made to feel that those over whom they have absolute power deserve to be mistreated, humiliated, tormented. They do them when they are led to believe that the people they are torturing belong to an inferior, despicable race or religion.’

I remember a conversation I had years ago on the long plane trip from JFK to Tel Aviv with a delightful old Israeli grandmother who had immigrated from New York years before and was returning to the Land from a visit to her family in America. She talked passionately—with me in my clericals—about the unity of races and religions. “We are all the same,” she said, “You and I.” “I agree,” I replied, “And what about Muslims?” I asked. “Well, that’s different!” she said. “They have a defective faith. Don’t you think?”

Let me try to be clear, even if I must seem harsh. The questions the lawyer asks to justify himself, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” and “Who is my neighbor?” can shockingly be asked in the negative: “Who can I abuse? Who can I humiliate? Who can I sadistically torture?” For to abuse the Other we must distance ourselves from them. We must doubt their humanity and move away from their dignity.

But Jesus calls us to do what the Samaritan does and “come near.” Not so that we might be justified—but for the sake of grace—that *we* might find grace and mercy to help in time of need. For mercy comes to those who have no right to expect it; and grace to those who cannot resist it. And inevitably these come from a quarter we least expect. To “go and do likewise” is to go near, to stay with—to *become* the one left for dead in the ditch by the side of the road.

To imitate the Samaritan means to be awakened to grace coming from a stranger, an enemy, a Misfit, a terrorist, one whom we have until now regarded as morally or socially inferior. It is this moment of realization that triggers the snare that frees us from a justifying, guilt-ridden religion. It is that moment when our needs are revealed so that the grace of God (who always appears as a stranger and sometimes as our enemy) can meet those needs.

This is to say, grace is always “Christ shaped” whatever its cultural or religious context; it always comes to us as the dehumanized Other. And when it comes it reveals to us the true nature and gravity of our complicity in its dehumanization and at the same time offers us healing and forgiveness. And it brings a clarity of mind that involves the giving up of our anxious self-justifications. We call this experience conversion. And it is our joy and agony as the new people of God to keep undergoing a continuing conversion.

Grace and Peace to you.

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