

Pentecost 5C, Proper 10. Luke 10:25-37. July 14, 2019.

Luke doesn't want us to like this lawyer who asks questions to "test Jesus" and to "justify himself." In fact, we probably aren't supposed to think much about him at all. He's meant to be just one of many foils who oppose Jesus, only to be defeated and somewhat embarrassed in the end. We hear the beloved parable of the Good Samaritan start, and the lawyer just fades into the background. The passage ends with Jesus telling him to go and show a practical mercy that is love, and we rightly hear it as a command to us.

But I've been thinking about this lawyer this week, who has some of the right answers but all the wrong motives. And Luke's right, he isn't a paragon of righteousness. When, trying to justify himself, he asks "Who is my neighbor?" we all know that what he means is "Who can I skip over? Who can I exclude from this strenuous love commandment? What about people who don't look like me? What about people who speak another language or come from another place?" If we think about him, then we probably don't like him very much, even if in our more honest moments we can recognize some of ourselves in him. But Luke doesn't actually slam the door on him. The passage ends with Jesus giving him a call, a task, an invitation. And although Luke is obstinately silent on what happened next, I've become convinced that this lawyer accepted the invitation. I've become convinced that this isn't a story of Jesus defeating a generic foil, but of him converting a lukewarm opponent. In other words, when Jesus tells him to "go and do likewise," there's no reason to think he didn't give it a try.

I'm not claiming that he became a saint who scoured the roadsides for unfortunate travelers he might help. I imagine him being much like us: full of poorly realized good intentions, generally decent but too busy at work and worried about his kids, sometimes unable to do more than shake his head at a world that is so happy to leave people dying on the roadside, but occasionally having almost a spasm of loving heroism where he truly goes and does likewise, where he sees even his enemies in need as neighbors with the same claim to his love as God has. I see him as a convert much the way we are converts: a person whose perception of the love of God has been blown wide open, whose struggle now is to live into love the way he wants to, rather than his old ways of looking for ways to justify himself and test those who threaten his comfortable faith.

At the beginning of the story, he already knows the correct answer to his question. But knowing that the answer is love is very different from embracing the work of love. And Jesus takes him there by telling a story. Jesus tells the story of the good Samaritan to respond to the question of who is the neighbor. And the story shifts the focus from other folks: who qualifies as my neighbor? to the actions of the questioner: being a neighbor means enacting a loving mercy for those in need. At the end, the lawyer gets it—he correctly answers Jesus' last question and, in my conjecture, receives the invitation to go

and do likewise. What changes him from a skeptic or even opponent to an ally is not infallible logic or deeper scriptural exegesis, but a story.

How are people moved from comfortable platitudes to challenging action? From a cautious regard for protecting their own long-term or even eternal interests to risky works of loving mercy? How do we change people's minds or, frankly, just change people? Jesus does it with a story. This resonates with me. The times when my mind has most profoundly changed have come from listening to the stories of people unlike me. As much as I may think about something or investigate something or search for an answer, it has always been a good story that has finally turned me around and set me on a more compassionate, loving path.

Yesterday I was privileged to be at a rally for immigration justice at which a number of people who have been caught in the cruel nonsense of our broken immigration system told their stories. A survivor of American internment camps for Japanese-Americans in World War II told her story. People who have reason to fear the advertised raids that are supposed to start today told their stories of fleeing from poverty and violence in hopes of a life of safety and hope. Young adults told stories of missing the funerals of their parents because they were separated by borders and red tape. And we heard the stories of what is happening now, with children in cages on our border. These are stories we need to hear, not for partisan political fodder, but so that our imaginations can be transformed to include these children from another country with another language as our neighbors in need of our help. So that we can see that these folks have as much a claim to our love as God.

We, like this lawyer, can be transformed by the stories of people unlike us, to come closer to the boundless love of God. But also, *we* have a story to tell that the world needs to hear. A world so anxious to lock need in a cage needs to hear the story of redemption: of a God who set aside the privileges of divinity to take on the risk and beauty of human life; who fled violence and persecution as an infant, and returned to teach and to heal; who ate with sinners and confronted the powerful with the truth; who finally submitted to death so as to overcome death, creating a power stronger than death with nothing but his love. The story of a God who has never stopped coming to those in need and calls us there gently but without ceasing. This is our story to tell to a world in desperate need of redemption. It is a story that can transform the world. Amen.