

In the final episode of the TV sitcom *Seinfeld*, the four friends are flying to Paris in NBC's private jet. The plane almost crashes, but they're able to make an emergency landing in a small town in MA. While standing around killing time, waiting for the plane to be repaired, they witness a man getting carjacked at gunpoint. Instead of helping him, they point and laugh, crack jokes about his weight, film the car-jacking on a camcorder, and then start to walk away. The victim sees all this and tells the police. The four main characters are taken into custody and put on trial for violating a 'duty to rescue' law, which requires bystanders to help when someone is obviously in need - otherwise known as the 'Good Samaritan' law.

Only 8 states have 'Good Samaritan' laws that can be used against someone for doing *nothing*. These are not to be confused with the law of the same name that is meant for people who do *something*, to protect those who come to the aid of someone in need from being sued if they make some mistake in the process of trying to help. All 50 states have laws like this, but the protection they offer varies. In 2008, for instance, the CA Supreme Court took a narrow interpretation of the law and ruled that a woman who pulled a co-worker from a crashed vehicle was *not* immune from liability because the care she rendered wasn't medical.

All this is to say that the term 'Good Samaritan' is a familiar one to most people. Even though it's obviously based on the biblical parable, it's in common, secular usage. 'Good Samaritan' is synonymous with helping those in need. I wonder how many hospitals, nursing homes, and other helping facilities there are across the world using that name. Here in the Bay Area, there is the Good Samaritan Hospital in San Jose, the Good Samaritan Veterinary Hospital in San Leandro, Good Samaritan Rehab in Stockton, and the Good Samaritan Ministry at Grace Community Church in Modesto. Right here in San Francisco, is the Good Samaritan Family Resource Center, which has been serving the immigrant community since 1894. It's rather remarkable that this story, told only in Luke's gospel, has become such a universal example of ethical behavior.

The problem with the story is that it is so familiar. I'd bet that when I started to read the gospel, somewhere in your mind you thought, "Oh, yes, Good Samaritan; got it, do good to your neighbor, don't have to listen, know how it turns out." This is a classic example of what John Dominic Crossan calls an *example* parable, that is, one that teaches us how to act, in this case, like the Samaritan.

But here's a different way to look at it. Crossan proposes that this parable is not an *example* parable, whose purpose is to make you act, but rather a *challenge* parable, whose purpose is to make you debate. A challenge parable is meant to provoke. At the seminar I attended last month, Crossan described a *challenge* parable as 'a tiny pin close to a balloon, which makes the balloon very nervous.'

If Jesus meant to provoke the crowd that heard him tell this story, to challenge them to think and debate, he certainly succeeded. The appearance of a Samaritan as the helper doesn't have the same punch for us as it did for them. But we can imagine Jesus starting the story, as was commonplace in those days, with "a priest and a Levite came by." It's just as we might begin a story, "a doctor, a lawyer and a priest walked into a bar." It was so ordinary that people would have expected to hear that the next person was an Israelite - that was the usual third person in the trio - a priest, a Levite, and an Israelite, an ordinary guy, a regular person, who'd come to the rescue of the poor, wounded man.

But surprise, surprise, it's not one of our own who saves the day - it's the *enemy*, a hated Samaritan. If we put ourselves in their sandals, we can hear the gasps, the teeth grinding, the stomachs churning, as their sensibilities are mightily offended. But here's the thing. If this is just an *example* parable for Jews, does it make sense to have a Jew in the ditch and a Samaritan as the helper?

If Jesus wanted to teach love of neighbor in distress, he could have simply used the standard folk tale threesome of one person, a second person, and a third person. If he wanted to do this *and* add a dig against the religious authorities, he could have mentioned priest, Levite, and let the third be a Jewish lay-person. Most importantly, if he wanted to teach about love for one's enemies, it would have been radical enough to have a Jewish person stop and assist a wounded Samaritan.

The literal point of the story challenges the hearer to put together two impossible and contradictory words for the same person: 'Samaritan' and "neighbor". The whole thrust of the story demands that one say what cannot be said, what is a contradiction in terms: Good-Samaritan. The point is not just that one should help the neighbor in need. But when good (priests) and bad (Samaritan) become, respectively bad and good, a world order is being challenged.

But we don't live in 1st century Palestine. What are Samaritans to us? If this is to be a *challenge* parable to us, we have to ask: "How is this parable 'a tiny pin' coming close to our balloon? What's our balloon? How does this parable make *us* nervous?"

What comes to mind for me is how we see ourselves as a nation. It's political blasphemy, but what would it mean for the United States to see itself in the role of defenseless victim? We don't like that, as our response after 911 showed. Of course no one wants to be a victim; no one should be a victim. But if we cast ourselves in the role of the man in the ditch, then we are forced to ask what it would mean to be served or helped by someone who is an enemy, or who is hated, or feared, or simply not like us?

What would it be like to be able to allow ourselves to see Afghanistan as our helper? To see Haiti as our defender? To admit our need for mercy and grace? Post 911 might have looked a lot different. There's a 'tiny pin' close to a big balloon for sure. It really is no wonder they killed Jesus for stirring up such ideas.

I have to say that, at this point I'm not feeling as much nervous as a bit conflicted. Because if the intent of this parable is to provoke discussion and debate, the sermon is not the best vehicle to do that. We should be pulling the chairs into a circle and putting ourselves into the story, talking about the challenges that come up for us by seriously reading it. So a 'tiny pin' for me is learning to balance the traditional way of 'preaching' with a more participatory time, maybe an interactive sermon once a month. Or a 'tiny pin' for us as a congregation might be to look for other times for discussion about the practical implications of our sacred texts in our day and age.

For now we will have to take the discussion home, wrestle with it ourselves, let it come up in conversations – at refreshment time, over email, at a meeting – this idea that Jesus, in this text, would have us identify, not with the good Samaritan, but with the Jew, the victim, the wounded man in the ditch. And how does that make us nervous, not just as a nation, but as individuals?

Yesterday, I helped lead the Sacred Saturday service at St. Mark's. Part of the service is *lectio divina*, which is a contemplative way of reading and praying with scripture. The text is read three times, with silence in between, for reflection on what speaks to you, what is new for you, what God might be saying to you, and something for which you want to pray, in response to your contemplation.

The text yesterday was this 'Good Samaritan' parable. And, of course, I've been thinking about it all week, especially about this idea of moving away from championing the Samaritan as our ethical exemplar and instead a *challenge* parable. But I was having a hard time letting that idea get from my head, as a concept, to my heart as a reality. On my way to St. Mark's, I stopped at the 7/11 for a Diet Coke. A homeless man sitting outside the store asked me for spare change. This time I said no, and of course felt guilty, like the priest who crossed over to the other side.

During the *lectio divina*, what came to me was the realization that if I am the wounded person in the parable, then the homeless man is the Samaritan. If the roles of powerful and powerless are reversed, then I am the one in need. If the roles of socially acceptable and socially marginalized are reversed, then I am the wounded one. If the roles of insider and outsider are reversed, then I am the vulnerable one. I am helpless to resist mercy and grace. My prayer at the end of the contemplation was to be open to ways that God might be showing me how to receive grace and blessing from those whom I would usually look upon as only able to take, not to give.

I think that's when I got it. Crossan says that *challenge* parables have no right answers; rather they encourage us to think, discuss, learn, change, grow. Not that it's a comfortable place to be. That 'tiny pin' is getting close to my balloon, my illusion of self-sufficiency and social standing, my place, my rank in the order of things. But that appears to be where Jesus meant us to be. So this is where we could pull the chairs around and you could also share how this would apply to you, to your balloons.

All the parables are about one thing: the dominion of God, realm of God, kingdom of God. That dominion is now; it is the vision of God for a turned upside-down world, where the enemy can turn out to be the hero, where the oppressed are the ones who show compassion, where the powerless are the ones with real power. To live in that dominion now is a challenge. Crossan said that "the purpose of (this 'Good Samaritan') parable – and all of Jesus' parables – is to provoke discussion, debate, and thought about the standard paradigm and presumed normalcy of (our) 'reality.'

I like the word 'provoke.' It's probably not wise for a pastor to pray for her congregation to be provoked. But in the sense that Jesus meant it, I do. If he meant to stir up his audience to see a vision of the dominion of God, then his words apply to us today: "Go and do likewise."

Amen

Amos 7:7-17

This is what YHWH showed me: God was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line in hand.

"Amos, what do you see?" YHWH asked me.

And I said, "A plumb line."

Then God said, "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword."

Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.'"

And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom."

Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I am no prophet, nor the disciple of a prophet; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees. But YHWH took me from following the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'

"Now therefore hear the word of God. You say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.'"

Therefore thus says YHWH: 'Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.'"

Colossians 1:1-14

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae: Grace to you and peace from our loving God. We always thank to the Abba God of our Savior Jesus Christ whenever we pray for you, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant, a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, who has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy and pleasing to God in every way, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. And by the might of God's glory you will be endowed with the strength needed to stand fast and endure joyfully whatever may happen.

Thanks be to God for having made you worthy to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. God rescued us from the power of darkness and brought us into the reign of Jesus, God's Begotten, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus said, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?"

The lawyer answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

And Jesus said, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.

Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.

He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

The next day he took out two silver pieces, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend."

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

The lawyer said, "The one who showed mercy."

Jesus said, "Go and do likewise."