

What is your agenda?

Why are you here?

What do you want from Jesus?

Why would you set foot in his church?

There are no wrong answers here: please know that Jesus and this congregation of his followers and Facebook™ friends welcome you whatever your reasons for being here.

But those reasons are important.

Maybe you're here to see your friends, or to network and meet new ones.

Maybe you want inspiration, or clarity, or healing, or prayers, or encouragement, or support, or a place to get married, or free food.

Maybe you don't want to be here at all, but someone coerced you, whether they are sitting next to you or they are a voice that's even closer, inside your head, pressing you to obedient duty.

Maybe you are grateful for something or for many things that God has done in your life.

Maybe you relish and enjoy worship; maybe you endure worship to get to coffee hour.

Maybe you are part of the vision team, which has been exploring questions like this for our community as a whole for over a year, and today's the day we thank you so you were asked to show up.

Maybe you have no idea why you are here, but you have the courage and the compulsion to come anyway.

Consider why it is you have come here, because Jesus does, and he loves you enough to pay attention so deeply that it could haunt you, and heal you.

That is the testimony from the lawyer in today's gospel.

Luke is clear about his two-fold agenda: to test Jesus and to justify himself.

His clever questioning is designed to make Jesus make him look good...appearances being yet another longstanding reason to come to church.

The man is a scholar, well-versed in the law and its loopholes, and far more sure of himself than he is of this upstart teacher Jesus.

But Jesus makes him look silly, disarming him like a witness questioning the prosecuting attorney from the stand and spinning a story that has him gagging on a scene too bitter to swallow.

This man has probably never looked so bad or felt so small in all his accomplished life.

It is an encounter that will continue to haunt him, and heal him.

The story, of course, is the parable that we have come to name "The Good Samaritan," a title unthinkable for the man to whom Jesus told it.

There was no such thing as a good Samaritan; Samaritans were traitors to the true faith who perverted God's word and were summarily shunned and avoided by good Jews.

Think child molesting terrorists, only not as popular.

When Jesus asks the lawyer to name the neighbor, he won't even say the filthy S word; he stammers out *the one who showed him mercy*.

Meanwhile, the other characters in the story aren't much better, as biblical scholar Sharon Ringe points out.

The man in the story is a fool.

Anyone traveling down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho is in the wrong hood, asking for trouble, especially if they are alone, which is a sign that he has no family or friends, because only the lonely travel by themselves.

The priest and the Levite represent the temple cult that a good lawyer couldn't stand, the smug religious authorities out of touch with real people; it's no surprise that those divas wouldn't stop and soil their hands with anything like usefulness.

*Innkeepers too were a despised group, writes Ringe.*

*Their lives centered around places of public accommodation where transients like traders could be found.*

*Only people with no family in the area and no social or economic claims on anyone's hospitality would ever stay in inns, and decent people would avoid them at all cost.*

(Ringe, *Luke*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995, p. 158)

The robbers may have been the most respectable characters in the whole story, and would certainly have been more likely to be given the benefit of the doubt than a Samaritan.

There is no one in this parable for the lawyer to relate to; the entire story is cast with shadowy people that he would have avoided altogether, a whole world he would never live in, a neighborhood that he would never move into.

But it is that neighborhood that is Jesus' response to *Who is my neighbor?*

Jesus wants the lawyer, and wants us, to relate to all of them.

This story haunts me.

Again this week I have passed by on the other side of countless people in need, reaching a cup or a cause or a crisis toward my face.

I have hurried past to a wedding rehearsal or the hospital or the office, and every non-encounter has left me feeling like a useless piece of priest.

I could spin off plenty of good reasons I did not stop to help, but each one impales me on my own agenda, which is trying to justify myself, which I'm never able to do.

I fear I do not have enough: I don't have enough time, enough cash, enough patience or compassion, enough strength to carry the weight of the look in my neighbor's eyes... which is to say that I don't have enough faith that God will provide enough.

Hidden danger lurks wherever there is pain and suffering, even if the robbers are gone, because the needs are too many and too extreme and the only thing I have in enough abundance to provide is excuses.

I am too busy moving to be *moved by pity*, and I am too afraid of being moved to stop moving.

I have an agenda, and surely so does the one who needs my help, so I pass by on the other side if I'm not able to avoid the road altogether.

I can't save the whole world, I tell myself, and even though it's a cop-out and another pathetic failure to justify myself, on one level I'm right.

I can't save the world: because I'm not willing to die on the side of the road.

This story is part of a larger story, a longer story in Luke's gospel about Jesus dangerous journey to the cross.

He is on his way to Jerusalem, where he will fall among thieves, be beaten, be stripped, and be left for dead.

But notice: this particular story is not about going to Jerusalem, but coming *from* Jerusalem.

This is not a Good Friday parable; this is an Easter parable, an eternal life now parable.

In this story, Jesus is the Samaritan savior, and he is moved with pity as one who has been rolled and ditched on the roadside himself.

He's been there, done that, and he understands in a way that no self-protective priest or lawyer ever can.

He also has the wherewithal to provide for the helpless and hopeless...he has the time, the resources, and most of all, the strength and courage to underwrite real compassion.

He does not suffer from the need to look good, to test others or to justify himself.

He has already appeared as the object of horror in the story, the unspeakable scandal, the crucified Christ, the hero who is helpless on the cross.

He has already disappointed and disillusioned all of us and all of our agendas by being a victim, a dead duck, a messianic mess that upstanding religious officials want nothing to do with, a fool who traveled and died alone.

Now he walks the road with open eyes and an open heart to those who cannot save themselves, like the poor, helpless, half-dead lawyer who cannot justify himself.

And the priest who lacks the courage to stop.

And the innkeeper who has no better job offers, and the gangbanging robbers who need the money to survive, and the Levite who has his own story and no one to listen to it.

Jesus continues to walk our dangerous roads and sting our wounds with wine and oily characters, turning a ragged and unlikeable cast of shady personalities into a story of breathtaking grace, a story named church where excuses yield to mercy and power buckles to pity.

I don't know why you came here this morning or what you were looking for, but what you have found is an inn full of sufferers and a story full of sinners.

You have found a community founded on compassion, a motley assortment of characters brought together by a misfit messiah who dies on a cross and says *take up yours*, who walks the wrong way down the wrong paths and says *follow me*, who stoops to join a fallen, helpless, half-dead world with over-the-top concern and says to us *go and do likewise*.

And you have found a teacher who will not answer your questions or honor your agenda but will approach dangerously near to you, like an enemy bandaging your bloodied face with slow and tender hands, with eyes so attentive that he sees your real needs, your naked soul, and is moved with loving compassion.

He is pouring the wine, and paying attention so deeply that it will haunt you, and heal you.