



## Jesus' surprising reversals—part 6

Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour?

Luke 10.<sup>25-37</sup>

<sup>25</sup>And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, "Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

<sup>26</sup>He said unto him, "What is written in the law? how readest thou?"

<sup>27</sup>And he answering said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself."

<sup>28</sup>And he said unto him, "Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live."

<sup>29</sup>But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"

<sup>30</sup>And Jesus answering said, "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup>And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup>And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup>But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, <sup>34</sup>and went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. <sup>35</sup>And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, 'Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee.'

<sup>36</sup>"Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves?"

<sup>37</sup>And he said, "He that shewed mercy on him."

Then said Jesus unto him, "Go, and do thou likewise."

### Introduction to the series

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This homily is the sixth in a series of homilies entitled: "Jesus' Surprising Reversals." This series of homilies will focus on the Gospel of Luke, as he among the Gospel writers best epitomizes this theme. Or so it seems to me.

In this series of homilies, we examine how Jesus challenged, resisted, and—at least in his own life and ministry—reversed the world's value system, especially as it weighed and still

to this day weighs, the worth of individuals, or, in the language of the Doctrine and Covenants, “the worth of souls.”<sup>1</sup> In challenging, resisting, and reversing the world’s twisted value system, Jesus will surprise us by the individuals with whom he associates and the individuals whom he holds up as role models. He will also surprise us by equalizing and even being critical of those whom society thought of as heroic and looked to as role models. We will watch as Jesus brings a reversal of fortune to those whom he serves and a changing of the guard when it comes to role models of discipleship.

I might have named this series, “Jesus’ *Offensive* Reversals,” for his reversals often offended those who witnessed them—in word or deed. However, Jesus’ reversals as recorded by Luke were intended to do more than surprise. And they offended only to the degree that they challenged, resisted, and reversed the world’s value system, especially as it weighs the worth of individuals.

I believe, in fact, that Jesus’ challenge to and reversal of the world’s value system belongs near the top of any list concerning the purposes and objectives of his life, his teaching, and his ministry as a whole. Even more recognized and appreciated aspects of Jesus’ ministry—his healings, for example, or his teachings, or even his atoning sacrifice, death, and following resurrection, ascension, and enthronement—even these represent a challenge to and reversal of the world’s influences and values.

Jesus’ challenges to the world’s value system, however, are about more than simple ethics, as important as those are. They go beyond matters of how mortal beings conduct themselves *visa via* others while living on this telestial planet. His challenges are more far reaching than the temporal existence of this world. His challenges to the world’s current value systems have applications to the cosmos and how immortal beings exist and endure in the eternal realms. They point to the nature of “eternal life.” And, as always in Jesus’ intentions, they teach us something of the character of God, Himself.

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<sup>1</sup> DC 18.<sup>10</sup>

Gabriel informed Mary that she would have an extraordinary son. While the baby was still in her womb, Mary intuited at least a portion of that which would make him extraordinary. Through her son, God

“hath put down the mighty from their seats,  
and exalted them of low degree.  
He hath filled the hungry with good things;  
and the rich he hath sent empty away.”<sup>2</sup>

In Christ, God was sure to revolutionize the world through the reversal of fortune. Jesus would reject the twisted values of this world and seek to reverse its devaluation of the worth of souls. In our first homily, we saw that even while Jesus was still in her womb, Mary was through her pregnancy the first to benefit from his revolutionary reversal.

“For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden:  
for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.  
For he that is mighty hath done to me great things;  
and holy is his name.”<sup>3</sup>

In our second narrative (Luke 4.<sup>23-30</sup>), we witnessed Jesus, in a reversal of expectations, controversially hold up a Tyrian widow and a Syrian leper as examples of faith that his Israelite listeners should follow. These good examples that Jesus recommended be followed were set alongside poor Israelite examples.

In our third narrative (Luke 5.<sup>27-32</sup>), we watched as Jesus engaged in the intimacy of table fellowship with “publicans and sinners” thereby demonstrating his preference for publicans and sinners over “the righteous.” Many a reader of Luke’s narrative can be forgiven for

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 1.<sup>52-53</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Luke 1.<sup>48-49</sup>

deciding that had they been alive at this time, they would rather have been numbered with the publicans and sinners” who enjoyed his intimate presence than with the “righteous” who spurned him and missed out on the intimacy of his presence.

In our fourth narrative (Luke 6.<sup>20-26</sup>), we listened in amazement as Jesus reversed the meaning of blessedness with his four Beatitudes and their related pronouncements of woe. These Beatitudes and their accompanying woes teach and persuade us that being poor, hungry, sorrowful, and unpopular bring a blessedness that escapes the rich, full, happy, and popular. Through these Beatitudes, the reader reverses who and what they want to be.

True, such reversals are head turning. Jesus seems intent on disrupting us in our this-worldly comfort. But in these first few examples, we have only scratched the surface. Jesus is just getting started. In our fifth narrative (Luke 7.<sup>36-50</sup>), Jesus found another unexpected role model for his disciples to follow. It comes in the form of a woman who intimately, too intimately for many, washes Jesus’ feet. This woman, according to Jesus’ discernment, “sins are many.” Nevertheless, Jesus commends this woman for her faith and raises her as an example. Whether due to Lukes writing skills or Jesus’ own compassion, when this narrative is over, we want to be like this woman.

With the current narrative, Jesus, it seems to me, doubles down on his revolutionary message. Jesus holds up as a good example a Samaritan—an ethnic group perhaps even more despised than our earlier Tyrian or Syrian, and a class even more distasteful than our earlier publicans and sinners. As if that were not bad enough, Jesus has the gull to contrast the Samaritan’s good example with the bad example of an Aaronic Priest and a lower-level Levite—supposed pillars of society!

The last sentence is worthy of its exclamation point. The narrative itself is worthy of multiply exclamation points. We now turn to this narrative to examine what makes it so extraordinary and radical—and what makes it so consistent with Jesus’ calling to turn the world upside down.

the setting

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As today, Jesus' society possessed many accepted and false valuations concerning the worth of souls. Likely, his disciples accepted many of them. In this narrative, Jesus once more challenges these same false valuations of individuals through his teaching. In this instance his teaching comes in the form of parable. This parable was elicited by questions that a "certain expert in the Law" posed to Jesus. In posing his first question, this expert sought to test Jesus and his understanding of the Law.<sup>4</sup>

"What shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

Rather than answer the question, Jesus did what good teachers often do. He asked the questioner how he would answer his own question. The expert's answer to his own question shows discernment.

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself."

Jesus seems to have appreciated and agreed with the expert's answer and admonished him to so live his life. Then, the expert, wishing to maintain his own righteousness, asked, "And who is my neighbour?"<sup>5</sup> It is this second question that drew the parable from Jesus, though it also has application to the first question.

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<sup>4</sup> While the King James' translation of "tempt" might not have necessarily led its original readers to assume hostile or duplicitous intent on the part of the expert, it does so lead today. There is no reason, however, to conclude that the expert was hostile to Jesus, though such individuals certainly often were. As we think of "test" and "tempt" today, the Greek word, *ekpeirázō*, just as often means "test" as it does "tempt."

<sup>5</sup> The expert's second question does not seem to be posed in the spirit of "testing" Jesus, but, rather, in light of the expert's own interest in being or appearing "righteous." Again, there is no reason to assume that the expert was being tricky or clever—our knowledge of "lawyers," apparently, makes us suspicious. The expert could just as easily have been asking this question sincerely, wishing to understand just how broad Jesus' definition of "neighbor" was.

the essence of the parable

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We are so familiar with this parable that we can miss its radical nature. Here is the parable stripped of all its details.

A man who was traveling was attacked, robbed, beaten, and left to die by violent thieves. While the victim of this horrific crime laid helpless and nearly dead on the side of the road, two different people passed by without offering the assistance. Finally, a third traveler who passed the scene of the crime felt compassion for the victim and offered his assistance.

Of course, this stripped-down version makes the point that Jesus wished to make. So, who acted like a neighbor? The person who helped, of course. And who is your neighbor? Anyone in need, no matter how far or near.

Though this stripped-down version does make the point, it doesn't make for a very good story. And Jesus was a good storyteller. So, of course, Jesus added lots of color and detail to his story. But what color and what detail he chose! Jesus chose colors and provided details that went far beyond those necessary to answer the expert's question and make his point. Indeed, in some ways Jesus' editorial choices might have gotten in the way of his accomplishing the limited goal of answering the question, as they had a very good chance of stirring up controversy.

But, it is in the color and detail that the radical nature of this parable is to be found. It is in the color and detail that Jesus' radical reversal is found.

the color and details of the parable

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Among the colors and details of Jesus' story, we find these editorial choices most interesting: the location of the robbery, the identity—or the lack thereof—of the robbed, the two individuals who refused to help the robbed, and the individual who chose to assist the robbed. All of Jesus' choices were very purposeful. Their purpose was to do more than

answer the expert's question. Their purpose was to contribute to his mission of reversal.

Let's consider the matter of location. Jesus chose to have his story take place on a road between Jerusalem and Jericho. It has been suggested that the road between Jerusalem and Jericho was notoriously dangerous, being closely observed by thieves. If true, this detail adds a bit of realism to the story. Jesus' audiences could have been expected to be aware of the road's reputation. They could have seen in their minds eye the road with its cunning hoodlums. Yet, there were surely other dangerous roads. Why not choose one of those?

It seems clear that for purposes of answering the expert's question any road and any location would have done. The story could have taken place on any road. Jesus could have had the man traveling from Jerusalem to Bethlehem or from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. He could have had the man on a road between Jerusalem and Emmaus, Beth-el and Shechem, Cana and Nazareth, etc. The choices are endless. But Jesus chose to have the man robbed and beaten half to death while traveling on a road that went between Jerusalem and Jericho. It seems that in choosing this road, Jesus' had something more in mind than answering the expert's question: "Who is my neighbor?"

Then there are the two antagonists. Jesus chose to have an Aaronic priest and a lower-level Levite play the role of antagonist. Obviously, these classes of Jewish citizens were at the top of the social scale and high on the list of possible role models. They were highly respected. The benefit they brought to society through their temple service would have been highly valued. So, Jesus' choice to have them as antagonists in his story seems odd.

This is especially so if Jesus' intention was merely to answer the expert's question: "Who is my neighbor?" Why not choose as antagonists a baker and a butler, a shepherd and a vintner, or a smith and a potter? Again, the possibilities are endless. I mean, think about it. Would any of these other potential choices of antagonists change the fundamental answer to the expert's question? It seems not. So, why did Jesus choose a priest and a Levite?

Of course, one might respond that if anyone would do, why *not* choose an Aaronic priest and

a Levite? I can think of several reasons, not least of which is the perception of disrespect to priesthood leaders. Just imagine the scandal it would cause today if someone cast a latter-day prophet, general authority, bishop, etc. into a role as uncaring and irreligious as that in which Jesus casted the priest and Levite!

There can be very little doubt that Jesus' selection of a priest and a Levite as antagonists in his parable would likely have been seen as controversial and unnecessarily provocative. There can be little doubt that Jesus full well knew this. It seems clear that Jesus knew exactly what he was doing and that he intended his parable to do more than simply answer the legal expert's question.

Then there is the matter of Jesus' selection of his protagonist. For this, Jesus chose a Samaritan. Unlike a priest or Levite who were high on the social ladder, a Samaritan was about as low as one could get on the social ladder. This was largely due to their gentile heredity and unorthodox religious beliefs and practices. Jesus' Jewish audiences would have brooked no sympathy for a Samaritan. Indeed, hatred abounded for this population. So, if Jesus' decision to have a priest and lower-level Levite play the role of antagonists was provocative, the provocation of his choice of a Samaritan as his *protagonist* would have been off the charts.

Now, Jesus might be forgiven for his selection of a Samaritan if it somehow clarified and enhanced the answer to the expert's question: "Who is my neighbor?" But it does not. Again, he could have picked anyone as protagonist. If he wanted someone of lowly status—though even this is not necessary to answer the expert's question—he could have chosen a Jewish sinner, publican, leper, etc. He could have picked a carpenter, fisherman, merchant, etc. Again, the possibilities are endless.

Then too, one can easily imagine how Jesus' provocative choice of antagonists and protagonist could work against him if his intention was only to answer the question: "Who is my neighbor?" The answer could very easily become lost in his controversial choices.



On the other hand, let's say that Jesus had chosen the Samaritan as the antagonist and the priest or Levite as protagonist. One can see how such choices would have allowed his audience to appreciate his answer more fully without the distraction of controversy. However, such choices would have come with the disadvantage of leaving a false valuation of souls intact. This, Jesus could not do. The Spirit of the Lord that rested so fully on him would not allow it. Jesus' calling called for something more. We now turn our attention to that something more, and how it is reflected in the parable.

The devil is in the details and color

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It might be deemed inappropriate to speak of "the devil" being in the details when it comes to Jesus and his teaching. But we can be pretty sure that Jesus' selection of the details struck many as unnecessarily provocative: impish, at best, and devilish at worst.

We begin, once more, with the location. It is our sense that Jesus was committed to having his story take place on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho for reasons other than or in addition to the fact that its travelers were subject to violence and robbery, thus giving his parable an element of realism. It has been suggested that in the time of Jesus, Jericho "was the residence of about half of the priestly orders."<sup>6</sup> This means that this road more than any other saw temple personnel frequenting it, either going to or returning from temple service.

This too added an element of realism to Jesus' parable. Jesus' audience would have known the road. His listeners could picture the devout high priest or Levite as he made the journey to and from Jerusalem, with its temple as the center of their lives. They could imagine either the spiritual preparation and emotional anticipation each man felt as they went to serve in the temple, or they could imagine the spiritual and emotional euphoria each man experienced as he returned home from his rare opportunity to serve in the temple.

Still, this begs the question, why choose a priest and Levite as antagonist in the first place? And why choose a Samaritan as the protagonist? Given Jesus' call to "put down the mighty,"

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<sup>6</sup> E. Earle Ellis, *The New Century Bible Commentary*, "The Gospel of Luke," p. 161.

the answer is, by now, obvious. Jesus was inviting his audience to reexamine their valuations of personal worth.

In his parable, Jesus was suggesting that Samaritans do not deserve Jewish hatred. Samaritans were as capable as anyone of doing good and being good. Indeed, they were as likely to obtain eternal life as the next person. This was provocative enough. His other reevaluation was perhaps more so. Priests and Levites did not deserve any greater respect than anyone else. They were of no greater value to the community than anyone else. They were no more likely to be and do good than anyone else. They were just as likely to be uncaring and unhelpful as anyone else. They were no more likely to achieve eternal life than anyone else. Indeed, perhaps the priest and Levite were less inclined to do good and further away from eternal life than the Samaritan!

Here, we must consider that Jesus was utilizing the priest and Levite as antagonists for yet another reason. Through them, he was commenting on the state of Jewish religion and especially its fixation on all things temple related.

Consider the two antagonists and their reaction to the robbed man lying beaten on the side of the road. The priest, “when he saw him... passed by on the other side.” On the other hand, the Levite, “when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side.” We can’t be sure what the Levite’s coming and looking on the robber entailed. Whatever it was, it entailed more than the priest was willing to do, as he avoided even looking on the robbed.

Again, we have an element of realism here. But this element of realism did more than make the parable more understandable. It added to Jesus’ desire to overturn the world’s perverted value system with its false valuations of personal worth.

The priest, whether he was going to or had just served in the temple, was required to maintain a much higher level of ritual purity than the Levite. The man robbed and lying beaten on the side of the road represented a distinct threat to ritual purity. Having been beaten, he was

undoubtedly bloody. Blood defiled. Were the priest to touch the man and get his blood on him, he would become impure and subject to sanction as to his ability to serve. The risk was too great and so he maintained as much distance between himself and the robbed man as was physically possible. The Levite, with less to lose if he became unclean, chanced a closer encounter. But, in the end, he chose ritual purity over the risks involved in helping an unclean man.

What a perversion of religion! What a perversion of righteousness! Temple purity falsely took priority over the wellbeing of another. In this case, temple purity made it less likely, if not impossible for one to care for another. So, in Jesus' choice of priest and Levite as antagonists, we seem to hear an echo of the prophetic ambivalence toward the temple. Take Micah, for example.

“How should I approach YHWH?

How should I bow to my exalted God?

Should I approach him with a fully burnt offering?

How about with new-born calves?

Will YHWH be satisfied with thousands of rams?

How about with countless channels of olive oil?

Should I offer my firstborn for my willful defiance?

How about my offspring for less serious private infractions?

He has already told you, man, what is good.

What does YHWH want from you

but to do justice,

and love compassion,

and be willing to live like your God?”<sup>7</sup>

Or, there is Jeremiah, whom Jesus quotes when “cleansing” the temple.

“Hear the word of the LORD, all ye of Judah, that enter in at these gates to worship the

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<sup>7</sup> Micah 6.<sup>6-8</sup>, author's translation

LORD. Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. Trust ye not in lying words, saying, “The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, are these.”

“For if ye throughly amend your ways and your doings; if ye throughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbour; if ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your hurt: then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, for ever and ever.

“Behold, ye trust in lying words, that cannot profit. Will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal, and walk after other gods whom ye know not; and come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, “We are delivered to do all these abominations?””<sup>8</sup>

Individuals such as our priest and Levite, perverted with perverted religious logic, were not worthy of being held up as pillars of society or as examples to be followed.

But as we know, Jesus’ provocation did not end with his choice of antagonists. He added to it with his choice of Samaritan as protagonist. For a number of reasons, not least of which being the fact that they rejected Jerusalem’s temple and had built their own temple on Mount Gerizim, Jews of Jesus’ day considered a Samaritan as the ultimate apostate and the most unclean when it came to ritual impurity. And yet Jesus’ Samaritan—perhaps precisely because of his lack of concern with false purity—could help the robbed and beaten man without fear of impurity. And how he helped! How very, very, very, far he went beyond either priest or Levite! He did not simply go the extra mile, he went an extra ten miles. To say that the Samaritan put the priest and Levite to shame is an understatement of gigantic proportions.

Unlike the priest and Levite, the Samaritan “had compassion” on the beaten man. Unlike the priest and Levite, the Samaritan “went to him.” The Samaritan “bound up his wounds.” He poured “oil and wine” on the wounds. The Samaritan “set [the wounded man] on his own

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<sup>8</sup> See Jeremiah 7.<sup>2-10</sup>

beast.” He “brought him to an inn.” There, the Samaritan “took care of him.” The Samaritan devoted a good deal of time and effort helping the robbed man. But this was not enough for his sense of how others in need were to be treated. When he needed to leave, the Samaritan gave the inn keeper money for any further expense in caring for the robbed man. Going further, the Samaritan assured the inn keeper that he would return so that if the expense for the man’s care went beyond the amount already tendered, he could pay that as well.

“Which now... was neighbour unto him?” indeed!

But there is another element of the parable we should acknowledge: the identity of the robbed man. Jesus gave him none. After all the color and all the detail of the parable, Jesus added no color or detail to the identity of the robbed man. Why? *Because it did not matter who he was or what class he came from.* A person in need is a person who must be helped whoever they are or wherever they may be from. The question we must all ask ourselves when faced with the need of another is not who or what they are, but who and what we will be. The question we must all ask ourselves in every human interaction is not who or what the other is, but who and what we wish will be.

## Conclusion

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A legal expert came to Jesus to test his understanding of the law. Upon asking Jesus, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus allowed the expert to answer the question himself. He replied that to inherit eternal life one must love God and their neighbor. Seeing Jesus’ agreement, the expert followed up his first question with a second, “Who is my neighbor.” This question drew from Jesus the parable that has come to be known as that of the “Good Samaritan.” The parable demonstrates that one’s neighbor is anyone in need and that a good neighbor is one who helps those in need, whoever they may be or wherever they may be from.

This is all well and good as far as it goes. However, it is our view that while Jesus answered the legal expert’s questions about how eternal life is achieved and who our neighbor is, the

color and details of Jesus' parable went well beyond what was necessary to achieve the limited goal of answering the legal expert's questions. The color and details of Jesus' parable contributed to Jesus' mission of reversal—the reversal of this world's false value system and its false estimations of the worth of souls.

In unnecessarily and provocatively choosing a priest and Levite as antagonist in his parable Jesus was doing what his mother had foreseen God had called him to do. He was “put[ting] down the mighty from their seats.” In unnecessarily and provocatively choosing a Samaritan as protagonist in his parable, Jesus was “exalt[ing] them of low degree.”

Without saying so explicitly, by the time the parable is complete, Jesus had shown that in light of the two antagonists' unwillingness to help the beaten man they would not inherit eternal life. In this, he had, as his mother foresaw, “sent empty away” the priest and the Levite. On the other hand, Jesus suggested that because of the Samaritan's willingness to help his neighbor, he would inherit eternal life. In this, Jesus had “filled the hungry with good things,” as his mother intuited.

In addition to these reversals of fortunes and valuations of individual worth, and related to them, Jesus exposed the inadequacy and even disadvantage of the temple ideology that dominated his day. Temple ideologies of holiness and cleanliness created a sham religion that kept individuals from doing what was necessary and right in the lives of others, including those in desperate need of help. In a sense, Jesus reversed the fortunes of the temple, demonstrating that eternal life was more dependent upon what happened outside the temple than inside it. What one did inside the temple played second fiddle to how one treated others in the real every-day-world outside the temple.

With his simple parable, Jesus turned the world on its head! Jesus could hardly do anything more profound than to institute this sort of reversal. This was precisely what God called him to do. Jesus did it faithfully in both word and deed. But he went further and did it in the very way he conducted his personal life.

The legal expert had asked, “Who is my neighbor?” But, having presented his parable, Jesus, in another act of reversal, had asked, “Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves?”

So often, whether and how we help others depends upon our valuation of the one in need. In the language of the expert and Jesus, we ask ourselves, “Is this really our neighbor?” “Is this someone I want to help, can help, should help?” Jesus knows such questions are camouflage: questions that allow us to hide from our neighbor and to escape the often-inconvenient need of others. But eternal life is found in the reversal of our own questioning. It is found in our questioning how and what we are rather than who and what others are. Eternal life is found in our being a neighbor to all. Eternal life is found in our coming to see everyone as our neighbor.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is a remarkable parable. Hearing its message and applying it to our lives has the potential to make us remarkable people. It has the potential to make us remarkably useful in a world that knows so many wounded individuals in need of compassion and mercy.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: april 20, 2024)*