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The Good Samaritan¹

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In this morning's gospel lesson, Jesus tells the story of the good Samaritan, one of the most beloved of stories in the Bible and one unique to the gospel of Luke. It's important for us to note, however, that this parable is a part of an exchange with a lawyer, a lawyer who sets out to test Jesus: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus replies, "What is written in the law, what do you read there?"

But here, we need to stop for a moment, because Jesus doesn't really say "What is written in the law, what do you read there?" That *is* what we read in our bibles and we read that because what is written in Greek, the language of the New Testament is something a bit more curious, a bit more cryptic, a little less clear than the translation but a lot more intriguing. Let me give you a more literal translation of Jesus' response to the lawyer who questions: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

In true Talmudic fashion Jesus answers this question with a question — actually with two questions: First, "In the law, what is written?" And then, "How do you read?"²

In the law, what is written? How do you read? *How do you read?* Not *what* do you read, but *how* do you read?

Now this is a curious question, a questionable question, in fact. What kind of a response would such a question elicit? *I read well? I read slowly? I read often? I rarely read?*

How do you read? The lawyer goes on to answer Jesus' two questions by first answering the first question about what is written in the law. He says: "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 neighbour as yourself."

The lawyer tells Jesus and us what is written in the law, but in so doing he also tells us *how* he reads because his answer is revealing. His answer tells us something about his reading strategy, in answering the first question the lawyer quotes two passages: one from Deuteronomy and one from Leviticus; and in quoting the Deuteronomy passage the lawyer expands or adds on to what we

literally find in Deuteronomy 6:5 where Moses tells the people of Israel: “Hear O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” (NRSV)

“You shall love the Lord with all of your heart, soul, and strength ... full stop,” says Moses. But the lawyer adds one bit: he says that we should love the Lord with all of our heart, soul, strength *and mind*.

How does the lawyer read? To start with he reads something that isn't on the page. Does that mean that he reads inaccurately? No, I don't think we want to say *that* because the lawyer gives Jesus the very same answer that Jesus himself gave to a similar question in the gospel of Mark.³

Jesus and the lawyer both read in the same manner.

How does the lawyer read? The lawyer reads *with* Jesus and both read expansively, both read expectantly, both read the sacred text knowing that there is more there than meets the eye.

Both know that there is always more to know in the text. Both read with an eye that sees that the scripture has shades of meaning, implications and expectations not always evident, not glaringly present for speed readers; yet for those who labour over the sacred writings, for those who pause to pray their way through the word, for those who read with Jesus, the text opens up vistas and views that simply cannot be avoided; and so if you love God with all your heart and soul and strength, then you will love God with your *mind*. It only makes sense because if you are captured by the love of God, then that love is so inclusive that it cannot, that it will not, leave any part behind not heart, not soul, not strength and not mind.

The lawyer answered both questions that Jesus asked and he answered them well. But Jesus was not finished with the lawyer. Jesus didn't just want to know how the lawyer read, he also wanted to read the lawyer; to read into the lawyer a new way to understand what it means to inherit eternal life. And so Jesus tells the lawyer and us as well a tale, a tale we all know well.

A man goes on a journey — a journey in the wrong direction or at least the direction opposite to the one Jesus travels in the gospel of Luke. In the gospel of Luke Jesus is headed for Jerusalem. This man is headed for Jericho leaving Jerusalem behind. And as he travels he is robbed; stripped, beaten and left half dead in the middle of the road. You know the story. The man is scrupulously avoided by both priest

and Levite; by those in power, by those with power, by those who have the most to lose. But along comes the Samaritan — the religious alien, the religious other — in the midst of this holy land. Along comes a Samaritan — an enemy, a terrorist, a terror — who subverts and converts the hearer of this parable with the grand surprise that is the gospel. The Samaritan! The one to be feared is the one who gives, who gives lavishly, who gives graciously, who gives of himself for the sake of the one robbed of dignity and a future. The Samaritan demonstrates what it means to be a neighbour and in so doing invites us to identify Jesus with the Samaritan. We encounter Jesus in the parable as the Samaritan. That's how we read this sacred text.

You know this tale. You know it well. But there is more here than meets the eye because in chapter nine, in the chapter preceding this, we hear about another Jesus-encounter with Samaritans. But this one isn't a parable. This encounter is part of the narrative of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. Hear again the word of the Lord:

When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but the Samaritans did not receive him because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' But Jesus turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village. (Luke 9:51-55)

The village, I suppose, where Jesus tells the tale of the Good Samaritan.

How did Jesus read? How does Jesus read? Jesus reads sympathetically — sympathetically, which literally means *to suffer with*. Jesus reads the actions of the Samaritans sympathetically because he suffers with the Samaritans knowing that they are the outsiders, they are the marginalised, they have been habituated into a posture of suspicion. They have become suspicious because *they* are always under suspicion.

But *Jesus* doesn't read the Samaritans suspiciously, he reads them expectantly. He reads into the Samaritans a grace not evident in the first place. He tells a tale that changes the way people look at Samaritans and as we know from personal experience how people look at us affects how we see ourselves and how we see the world. Jesus doesn't only convert the Samaritans, however, he also converts those looking at them. Jesus converts you. He converts me.

And I need to be converted after reading chapter nine: I expect the worst of Samaritans because they rejected Jesus. They rejected his mission, his person, his reign and by extension they reject me because I side with Jesus. After chapter 9 I know where I stand with respect to the Samaritans and then along comes the lawyer with his question, which Jesus questions by asking, “How do you read?” But Jesus doesn’t just ask that question of the lawyer, he also asks it of me, “Allen, how do you read? How do you read? How do you receive ... the Samaritan, the stranger, the alien?”

And if I am honest with myself I have to say that too often I read poorly — I expect the worst of people. I employ on a broad scale the strategy I used to use when I rode my bicycle in Toronto: whenever I got on my bike I anticipated being hit by a delivery van and allowed myself to be pleasantly surprised when I wasn’t. Well, this might be a good strategy for riding a bicycle in a city but it is a horrible way to read people.

When I read of Jesus’ rejection by the Samaritans, by the Jews, by Muslims, by my neighbours, I have to admit that I don’t always read all that well. I get a little defensive, sometimes hostile; I don’t always like those who don’t like Jesus and when I see that in myself I also don’t like me.

How do I read? Not always so well. To use Luther’s words, I don’t always come to my neighbours’ defence, speak well of them, nor interpret everything they do in the best possible light. I don’t, but Jesus does. That’s how Jesus reads, that’s how he read the Samaritans, that’s how he read the lawyer, that’s how he reads you and me.

Jesus inverts, subverts, converts us ... by reading us expectantly.

Jesus encounters us as Samaritans in the village who refuse to welcome those on a different path. He encounters us as testy lawyers. He encounters us as self righteous priests and legalistic Levites. But Jesus doesn’t just encounter us, he also reads us, he reads the best into us; he reads mercy into us, he reads grace into us; he tells us into the tale of the Good Samaritan and changes us in the telling. At the end of the parable Jesus says “go and do likewise” because he knows that the parable has made it possible for us to do exactly that; to go and do likewise; to be the good Samaritan, to be the neighbour; to read well, to read mercifully, to read justly, to read with Jesus.

Notes

- ¹ This sermon, based on Luke 10:25-37, was preached at Saint Mark's Lutheran Church, Kitchener, on July 15, 2007. In this edited form it is dedicated to the Rev. Dr. Erwin Buck, whose passion for the biblical text has shaped the kerygmatic tradition of the Lutheran church in Canada.
- ² πῶς ἀναγινώσκεις;
- ³ Mark 12:30 (NRSV).