

## PSALM 82

- <sup>1</sup>God has taken his place in the divine council;  
in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:  
<sup>2</sup>"How long will you judge unjustly  
and show partiality to the wicked?  
*Selah*  
<sup>3</sup>Give justice to the weak and the orphan;  
maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.  
<sup>4</sup>Rescue the weak and the needy;  
deliver them from the hand of the wicked."  
<sup>5</sup>They have neither knowledge nor understanding,  
they walk around in darkness;  
all the foundations of the earth are shaken.  
<sup>6</sup>I say, "You are gods,  
children of the Most High, all of you;  
<sup>7</sup>nevertheless, you shall die like mortals,  
and fall like any prince."  
<sup>8</sup>Rise up, O God, judge the earth;  
for all the nations belong to you!

## LUKE 10:25-37

<sup>25</sup>Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" <sup>26</sup>He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" <sup>27</sup>He 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." <sup>28</sup>And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

<sup>29</sup>But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" <sup>30</sup>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. <sup>31</sup>Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup>So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup>But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. <sup>34</sup>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. <sup>35</sup>The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' <sup>36</sup>Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" <sup>37</sup>He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

## SERMON

I always know when I'm making an excuse. Sometimes it's warranted, or at least I tell myself it is. Something like begging out of plans with friends because I really need to be home with my kids. Sometimes that's entirely true, but sometimes it's just a convenient way of getting out of something I don't want to do. A meeting, a dinner, a phone conversation, whatever. This week I asked my friends on facebook to tell me about excuses they'd made this week. One woman, a pastor in Georgia, told me she'd made an excuse to get out of choir practice because she was afraid to tell her choir the truth, which was that she was just too exhausted and couldn't spend another night at church during the week. Another friend told me she pretends to have an allergy to certain kinds of food to excuse her from eating all of the weird jellos that show up at church potlucks. She's afraid of hurting the feelings of the church members who made the weird jellos.

We make excuses all the time, and what seems to make it an excuse, more often than not, is that we're saying something that may be partially true, but we're saying to keep ourselves from having to say what we really mean. It's easier to say I'm home sick with a cold than it is to say I'm just exhausted and burned out. It feels kinder to say, I'm sorry, I'm allergic to shrimp, rather than "wow, that pink, shrimp jello looks truly foul and I will not be putting it anywhere near my mouth." True story, shrimp jello. Blech.

And that's what the lawyer in today's story does when he meets Jesus. He's all about the excuses, couched in carefully constructed questions. He makes two excuses here, and the first is so sneaky,

you actually miss it in the English translation, but it's obvious in the Greek.

The first excuse this lawyer tries to wheedle in there is his first question, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" It sounds innocuous enough, and similar in many regards to what Jesus is always rambling on about. But if you look at it in Greek, that little word "do" belies the excuse. In Greek, this lawyer uses what's called the aorist participle, which is verbal form that indicates a singular, one time action. We'd pick up on it if the English said, "Teacher, what one thing must I do once to inherit eternal life?" The lawyer is asking for an item to add to his to do list. Pick up groceries, check, get suit at dry cleaners, check, inherit eternal life, check. And Jesus turns the question around on him, "Well, you tell me, what do you read in the law?" The Lawyer is learned, he knows the right answer, "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." Great! You win! He gets it, he knows what he should do. And then Jesus turns the tables a bit: "do this, and you will live." And again, the English obscures the trick of this passage. When Jesus says "do" he's not using the aorist like the lawyer, he's using a tense called the imperative. In Greek, the imperative implies ongoing action with no end. So, what Jesus is saying is really something like "always do this, throughout your whole life, and you will live."

Jesus catches the lawyer in this little excuse, and he pushes him back toward the truth: being a disciple, following God, it's not a onetime thing, it's an imperative, something you do throughout your life. So, there goes that excuse.

But this lawyer, he's shrewd, and he responds with a second excuse of sorts, "Well, ok then Jesus, that's fine to love God and neighbor, but tell me, who is my neighbor?" And it's a great question, right? Because it's easy enough to love God and neighbor...if we like all of our neighbors! This lawyer, again, is looking for the excuse, the easy out. This lawyer, he knows the law, and so he probably expects Jesus to give the straightforward answer any educated Jewish person of this time would give; for first century Jews, neighbors included all members of the Jewish community and those other folks who lived in close geographic proximity, be they Romans, Greeks, or any others. Throughout the Old Testament, God tells the people, again and again, to care for the resident alien in their community, not just the Jews.

And, as is his shtick, Jesus launches into a story about a man walking down the dangerous and rocky road to Jericho. Along the way, this man is set upon by robbers and bandits. They strip him, beat him, and leave him half-dead along the side of the road. After a while, a priest meanders by, and seeing the man, he crosses to the other side and continues on his way, ignoring the man in need. Later, a Levite passes by, and just like the priest, he shirks his duty to care for this bleeding and broken man, and quickly walks on. And just so we're all clear: there's no excuse for either of these men. This isn't about ancient purity laws or what priests and Levites should or shouldn't do. Just like today, if you see a person in need of dire medical attention on the side of the road, you are obliged by the laws of both morality and common human decency to go and help them. So, these two guys, just to be clear, are selfish jerks.

And before we get to the Samaritan here, I should clear up a few things. Jesus loves this little trick called the “rule of three.” Jesus does it all the time. He takes a common list of three things. One and two go as planned, but then instead of going with the typical three, Jesus changes it up for effect. So, imagine lists like “Red, White and ...” You expect to hear “blue” not “purple.” Or “Larry, Curly, and Moe.” In this list, anyone listening to Jesus would expect it to go “Priest, Levite, and Israelite.” That’s a really common list throughout the Jewish world.

And so it’s surprising to the audience when Jesus says “Priest, Levite, and Samaritan.” Today, that word “Samaritan” makes us feel kind of good. We have hospitals and aid organizations and even laws named after this “Samaritan,” it’s synonymous with someone who helps. But at the time, the Samaritans were the enemy. And not just like, someone who annoyed the Jews, but their honest to God, deeply felt enemy. This isn’t “Larry, Curly, and Moe.” In the words of one commentator, this is “Larry, Curly, and Osama Bin Laden.”<sup>1</sup> This isn’t the parable of the “Good Person Who Helps” this is the parable of the “Good ISIS Fighter,” “The Good Terrorist,” “The Good Timothy McVay.” That’s the visceral level of reaction this lawyer would have had upon hearing that this “Samaritan” was the one to pick up the man, care for his wounds, and see to his wellbeing.

In fact, when Jesus ends the story, he asks a question, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man?” And the lawyer can’t even bring himself to say the word “Samaritan.” He

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Jill-Levine. Page 95.

sidesteps saying the name by instead saying, “the one who showed him mercy.”

Again, Jesus confounds the excuse the lawyer thinks he’s going to get away with. The lawyer is expecting that his neighbor is someone near him, or at most a member of his own community. But it’s not. Jesus is highlighting the fact that our neighbor is the one who is near us, as we walk along that road, but it includes everyone, even our deadliest enemy. Throughout the ancient world, it was common practice to believe that you could not mistreat your enemy, you had to offer them water if they were thirsty, that sort of thing, but Jesus was a true outlier in saying that we should love our enemies. And in this story, we hear it again: as followers of Jesus, we have no excuse to hide behind, we are called to love God and love our neighbors, and our neighbors may include folks we don’t like, folks who scare us, in fact, they may be folks we find ourselves hating.

I love that Jesus ends this conversation with the lawyer by saying, one more time “Go and do likewise.” And, again, this is the second time Jesus uses that imperative form of “do.” Go, and throughout your life, in all ways and at all times, do what this enemy did. Love God and show compassion to the people around you even your enemy. It’s a complete diffusing of the lawyer’s excuses: this isn’t a one time action, and it’s not a limited action. Love does not exist in the abstract. Love only exists when it is enacted in moments of compassion and mercy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 105.

Today, we don't often have chance of running into a member of ISIS along the road, so that may seem a bit abstract, at least compared to the close proximity the Jews and the Samaritans had to one another. But perhaps this might bring the parable home a bit. It's from a sermon preached by the inimitable Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on this very parable. He said, "I'm going to tell you what my imagination tells me. It's possible these men [the priest and the levite] were afraid...And so the first question that the priest and the Levite asked was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" ...But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?" Later in this sermon, King said, "If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?" This sermon he preached, it was preached just before King went to Memphis to march with the sanitation workers, at the time black sanitation workers were getting paid less than their white counterparts, and their working conditions were deplorable. It was there, in Memphis in 1968, where Dr. King was shot and killed.<sup>3</sup> As one commentator wrote, "There are bandits on the road."

But this is what it means to live a life of faith without excuse: to ask a question, not out of our own fear, but out of concern for others. To continually go and do for all the people God has gathered around us. Because love doesn't exist in the abstract. Love is real only when it is enacted and lived out toward the neighbors gathered around us, whomever they may be.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 94.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 105.

