

A Job for Letterman?

The Reverend Dr. Benton J. Trawick
Grace Presbyterian Church
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Micah 6: 6-8

Luke 10: 25-37

From 1972 to 1976, which coincided with my being 8-12 years old, there was a children's educational program on public television known as "The Electric Company." Perhaps some of you remember it? I think it continued to show in re-runs for a number of years afterward.

The Emmy Award winning show featured what was in hindsight a pretty star-studded cast, with a young Morgan Freeman, and Rita Moreno, and Irene Cara before she rose to "Fame;" it also featured the voice talents of Joan Rivers and Gene Wilder in a recurring animated segment known as "The Adventures of Letterman."

Now in each episode of Letterman, the narrator would describe a normal everyday situation. For example, "In today's episode, we find a young boy who has just eaten all of his spinach (ugh!) about to enjoy his dessert: a giant sundae! And the word "dessert" appears onscreen.

But just as the lad is about to dig into his treat, the arch-villain, the Spell-binder happens by. The Spell-binder likes to create havoc by making people unhappy, so he pulls a magic wand from beneath his cloak, saying "I think I'll change the menu." He waves his wand over the word "dessert" causing one of the esses to disappear, and suddenly, instead of enjoying his dessert, the little boy is sitting alone in a desert.

The boy begins to cry.

But just when all seems lost, Letterman hears the boy's cries and rushes to the scene. Faster than a rolling O, stronger than silent E, able to leap capital T in a single bound, Letterman always has just the right letter to undo the spellbinder's mischief. And taking the S from his varsity sweater, Letterman turns the cactus-filled desert back into dessert and saves the day.

The recurring Letterman segment was a clever way of teaching spelling, and reading, and word play, and with each new show the Spell-binder was back, turning delicious custard into mouth-puckering mustard or bright light into confusing night, and generally making people miserable until Letterman turned up to fix things.

So, what is the point of my childhood flashback? Well, it feels to me-- doesn't it seem to you? – as if some real-life Spell-binder has waved a magic wand and thrown us all into chaos. It feels as though our brother has somehow become the other and that the United States, our proud nation, is increasingly coming Untied.

Now let me say, as much as it may feel like a simple wand wave or an evil magician brought us here, this circumstance has not come about **only recently** or under a single administration. Long-simmering societal problems and prejudices and hyper-partisan politics, and a particular set of economic issues all combined over many years to give rise to our current cultural climate; but in our current cultural climate, because of our current cultural climate, our gradual drift has become an actual rift, and our current leadership, rather than fighting the flames or quenching the flames, continues to fan them. So here we are, a nation now ruled by extremes and polarities: a nation of reds and blues, of residents and aliens, of Proud Boys and Antifa, of us and them, a nation of people too-willing to define ourselves by what and whom we're AGAINST instead of by what and who we are called to be; a nation more inclined to building walls than to building bridges.

And sadly, just as we did not suddenly arrive in this place through a wave of the Spell-binder's wand, there is no Letterman to quickly and easily change the other back into brother or to return our Untied state to once more United states. Letterman is a cartoon character. The work of changing what we've become into anything that is different—will fall to us.

It will mean, for a start, that we must relearn the meaning of neighbor, and the calling of neighborliness—the very issues that are highlighted in our reading from Luke's gospel this morning.

Now, this is a story that I've known for fifty years or more, and you probably know it as well, so it's all too easy to jump ahead to some generalized moral: be kind to strangers; help out folks in need. Sort of like the boy scout motto: do a good turn daily. But I think the parable has more teeth

than that. A parable is meant to challenge, to subvert assumptions or invert understandings. So, there's more here than "If someone's in trouble, help them out."

As we recall, it all begins with a question. A certain man, a lawyer or religious scholar stood up to test Jesus. Teacher, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" As a note, inherit eternal life doesn't mean, "How do I get to heaven when I die, but rather, "How do I enter the kingdom of God? How am I to live rightly and righteously? And Jesus replies simply, "What does the law say? What do you read there?"

The man replies, "You shall love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus replies, "That's right. Just do that, and you'll live." Just do that, and you'll enter the kingdom already at hand.

Then the man, wanting to prove himself righteous, asks the question, who is my neighbor? And just as a dime has two sides thinly joined, a heads and a tails, this is actually two questions thinly joined like heads and tails—if we ask "Who is my neighbor," we also ask "Who is not?"

Jesus replies to the man's question with the story of the good Samaritan. Now before going any farther, let's pause and consider the obvious. The events Jesus is about to describe are not an actual historical occurrence. They didn't happen. Jesus is telling the man a story, he is teaching by means of a parable. And that means that Jesus chooses the events and the characters with intentionality.

So first the setting—a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, a barren, desolate stretch of road even today, when he was set upon by robbers who stripped him, beat him, and left him half dead.

Now by chance, a priest was going down the road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. Here's a small but significant point—the man who was robbed was going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, and in the story, the priest was also going down the road in the same direction, so that means he crossed the road to the other side to pass the man. He actually distanced himself, he went out of his way not to help. Similarly, a Levite, the designated lay-associate of a priest, passes the man by.

Many a sermon has been preached as to why the priest and the Levite might legitimately pass the man by, speculating for example that helping a dying man might render them unclean, but such speculations are irrelevant. The priest and the Levite are stock characters in Jesus' story. They represent conventional, upright, moral, religious people. People who would presumably be expected to render aid to the man in need. Set the story in a modern context, it would be like saying a pastor and an elder came upon the man and passed him by, or two good upstanding church folks came upon the man and passed him by.

For the purposes of Jesus' parable, what he is saying to the lawyer, "two men who knew the law and could quote it chapter and verse--"You shall love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" – did not stop and help. They knew the law by rote but not by heart: confronted with a person in dire need, they responded, "Not my circus, not my monkeys."

Now the third character in the story is ALSO a stock character—a Samaritan. And just as the priest and the Levite represent fine, upstanding people who are pillars of the religious community, a Samaritan is a figure who would be instinctively repugnant to many of Jesus' Jewish listeners.

Let's remind ourselves of what some of you may have heard before. In the glory days of Israel under David and Solomon, around 1000 years before Jesus tells the story, Israel reigned supreme in the entire middle eastern region, extending essentially from Egypt to Assyria. But Solomon's sons were unable to continue the dynasty, and the kingdom split in two after Solomon's death, leaving the Northern kingdom of Israel and the Southern kingdom of Judah.

Then, in 722 BCE, the Assyrian Empire overran the Northern Kingdom. And when the Assyrians conquered a territory, they had a remarkably effective way of eliminating potential resistance. They scattered the large numbers of the inhabitants across their empire, and brought in other conquered peoples to replace them. The practice broke down existing governments and cultural ties and left a hodgepodge of races, cultures, and religions in their place. So, ten of the twelve tribes of Israel were deported and dispersed. If you hear of the ten lost tribes of Israel, this is the event that scattered them.

Now instead of their Northern neighbors sharing their bloodline, their culture and their religion, the people of Judah had neighbors of different ethnicities, different traditions and different, foreign gods. The few remaining Jews in the former Northern kingdom became the Samaritans—some of them eventually married off to the people of other cultures. So, the Jews who lived in the former Southern kingdom viewed their northern neighbors as undesirable and unclean—foreigners. There was a longstanding and mutual disdain between the two groups.

But then it got worse still—about 125 years later, the Southern kingdom also fell, to Babylon, which had eclipsed the Assyrian empire. The Babylonians destroyed the Jerusalem temple and swept the inhabitants of Jerusalem away in captivity. When the Jews were finally allowed to return after the Persians defeated the Babylonians, they returned to a city and a temple in ruins. The Samaritans offered to assist in rebuilding the temple but were rebuffed. Spited and angered, they actually attacked and disrupted the construction of the temple several times, thus cementing the intense hatred between Jews and Samaritans—it was like a Middle Eastern version of the Hatfield and McCoy feud.

So, back to the parable—along comes a third stock character, a Samaritan, who might as well be called “NOT MY NEIGHBOR.” And just as the first two stock characters might be assumed to help the man in the ditch, the Samaritan might be assumed NOT to. Had they met in the marketplace, the Jewish man in the ditch might well have called the Samaritan an ethnic slur or spit on him. In Jesus’ story, THIS is the man who renders aid, bandages the man’s wounds, pays for his lodging, and promises to return to check on him.

Jesus, concluding his story, asks the lawyer: which of these three stock characters--the two we would instinctively respect, or the one we would instinctively disrespect--which do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?

And the lawyer replies, “The one who showed him mercy.”

Now—what is mercy? Simply stated, it is a choice: a decision to be lenient, or kind, or gracious when one is in a position to be otherwise. The robbers in the story Jesus tells were merciless. They chose to beat a man, stole his money, stripped him and left him to die. But the good, upstanding religious

figures in Jesus' story were also without mercy—in a position to render aid, they made a choice not to. If the robbers were actively merciless, the priest and the Levite were passively merciless.

So, Jesus has responded to the lawyer's question by redefining neighbor from a status—a person who is like me, a person with whom I share commonality—to an orientation to mercy. To wishing all people well and an acting with intentional kindness—REGARDLESS of who is in the ditch. As soon as we even ask the question WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR—as soon as we ask it!!!—we create a world in which there are people who are not. So, the point of the parable is that neighbor resides in me, resides in you. It is the decision to act with mercy, regardless.

Right religion is not moral purity—not proper doctrine—not learned theology, as might be symbolized by the priest or the Levite. In his epistle, James writes, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to take care of orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." The showing of mercy. Period. What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God?

So, back to where we are—in present day: how do we turn the other back into brother or unite what has become untied? Well, as I said before, it isn't a job for Letterman. It isn't a job for our elected officials. It is a job for us. And we can choose to do it—or we can choose not to. But we don't get to choose our neighbors. We can only choose to be one. Amen.