

Like most people, I don't enjoy being tested. All the way back in preschool, I remember my class being forced to sit a series of standardized tests, and while I kind of enjoyed the first part, a series of puzzles I can retrospectively recognize as an intelligence test, I remember feeling distressed and beaten down by the more rote and rigorous tests of knowledge and skills that followed. And at the time, I didn't know how good I had it! Life, of course, brings far more challenging and unpleasant tests upon us, especially outside of academe.

When St. Luke tells us that "a lawyer stood up to test Jesus," the first thing to know is that this "lawyer" was an expert in Jewish religious law, not what we think of as a lawyer today. The second is that while many commentators and preachers claim the lawyer was questioning Jesus with malicious intent, hoping to trap Jesus in his words and get him into trouble with the authorities, that's far from clear. It's not even clear where this lawyer came from, whether he was affiliated with anyone who opposed Jesus, or whether there was anyone around who might have been able to take adverse action against Jesus if they didn't like what he said. The two preceding verses are Jesus speaking to his disciples privately, but the passage we just heard begins with the phrase, "just then," so perhaps the lawyer was butting into a private conversation.

As annoying as that would be, the questions the lawyer asks aren't inherently malicious, like "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?". His first, "what must I do to inherit eternal life," is exactly the sort of thing a sincere student might ask a rabbi, and indeed is a popular question for religious seekers today. And the lawyer gives a good answer, basically the same answer that Jesus gives elsewhere. The lawyer's second question, "who is my neighbor," sounds tricky, and while it is provocative, it was a matter of live debate in ancient rabbinical discourse, and thus a perfectly fair thing to ask. And the text supports the possibility that the lawyer is sincere, if flawed, as the Greek word translated "to test" can mean "to prove [or] test thoroughly, or, to put to proof God's character and power."\*

We know that Jesus said, not to put God to the test, but the lawyer didn't know Jesus was God. So the lawyer might simply want to make sure that Jesus is as good of a rabbi as some are saying he is. Of course, he also ends up showing the difficulty of evaluating someone fairly when they tell us what we don't want to hear. I've been on both sides of that, I don't mind saying.

Jesus's answer to the question, "who is my neighbor," is one of the most famous parables of all time, perhaps the most famous, as the phrase "good Samaritan" is more frequently used than "prodigal son." The former gets 34 million results on Google, while the latter gets a paltry 13.2 million. But we might not like it as much if we dig into it.

No doubt, many a sermon has concluded with a declaration that the moral of the parable is, "Everyone is your neighbor!" While that is both succinct and upbeat, and therefore a convenient way to close out a sermon, it's the opposite of what Jesus said. The story is structured with three candidates for the title of "neighbor," and two out of

three fail to earn the designation.

Now, the acts of the priest and the Levite are defensible, even reasonable, and outside the context of the parable, one might well call them “street smart” for choosing to pass by. Indeed, in college, one of my friends was robbed by someone who was pretending to need help. The Jericho Road was a notoriously dangerous place, the man looked like he might be beyond help, and on top of that, priests and Levites had an obligation to remain ritually clean so as to be able to fulfill their responsibilities in the Temple. If the victimized man was already dead, or died on them, touching him would have created a serious problem for them. Many of us today have had experiences where we want to help someone, or someone wants to help us, but a serious professional obligation gets in the way. Most people are familiar with the phrase, “I’m sorry, but I can’t help you.”

So, to make matters worse for us as we grapple with this parable, the priest and the Levite are not bad people. They are harmless, sensible, dutiful. But they are not neighbors to the victim. Superficially, the Samaritan stands out because of the intense enmity between Samaritans and Jews at the time, but of course that isn’t why the Samaritan is a neighbor.

Before we move on to what the Samaritan does, we should pay attention to why he does it, since Jesus tells us explicitly. The Samaritan was “moved with pity.” But “compassion” might be a better translation. The scholar D. Mark Davis points out, “Luke uses this verb on two other occasions. It describes Jesus’ response when he sees a mother processing to bury her son... and it is the father’s response when he sees his lost son returning home... in another striking parable.”\*

On the one hand, the cause of the action that makes one a neighbor can only be love. But on the other hand, a mere feeling of love, sentiment without action, does not make one a neighbor. Jesus doesn’t say what, if anything, the priest and the Levite felt, nor does he name their intentions or motivations, because none of that matters, since they “passed by on the other side.”

Another thing that does matter within the parable is the resources at the Samaritan’s disposal. He has wine, oil, and an animal that can carry a man. He binds the victim’s wounds, likely by tearing strips from his own clothing, and that would have been an important detail in those days, since all clothing was expensive, being entirely handmade. And finally, the Samaritan is rich enough to be able to convince the innkeeper that he’ll be able to pay for any amount of care the victim might need.

That’s right: when you least expected it, you realized Father was preaching... a stewardship sermon! I did tell you I sometimes tell people what they don’t want to hear. But don’t bother bolting for the exits; I’m 70% of the way through, and the worst is over. Seriously though, we should be feeling good about stewardship at Advent; in response to my remarks last week, someone offered to make a special gift to support our music program in addition to their pledge, which both moved and impressed me. Though

there's room for more gifts, just saying.

The lesson I take from the parable of the Good Samaritan is that while not everyone is a neighbor, everyone can be, and God wants everyone to be. As Moses points out in today's reading from Deuteronomy, what God wants us to do "is not too hard for [us], nor is it too far away." God wants us to love God and our neighbor, by using the gifts God has given us to serve God and neighbor. And while we can always do more, we at Advent are off to a great start.

By the time I was in high school, I was pretty good at taking tests, and didn't find them nearly so distressing as I once had. My parents wanted me to take the SAT one more time, even though I already had a score that made it very likely that I would go to a good college. The test was scheduled for the same time as a dear friend's graduation, someone I wanted very badly to support and say goodbye to. Obviously it still bothers me that I chose to take the test, rather than show up for my friend. I didn't score any better, but the test I actually feel bad about is the test of priorities, which I consider myself to have failed.

People and institutions will always be judging us, and most of them are not malicious. They are generally harmless, sensible, dutiful. But they test and judge for their own purposes, according to their own standards. The great test of this life is not any of theirs, but whether we resist the ways of the world in order to act with love.

God knows that none of us are perfect, and none of us can make ourselves perfect, nor can any of us solve all the world's problems. God loves us anyway, loves us with the same generous, proactive love that the Samaritan showed. But the Samaritan was a fictitious stand-in for Jesus himself, who showed love to everyone he met, regardless of their intentions and their flaws. Jesus has in abundance the love the world craves, and he is generous and proactive in sharing it. Go and do likewise, even if you feel limited in what you can do. By sharing the love you have, in this physical world, you make the infinite love of God imaginable in a way even the greatest parable never could.

\*<https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/07/a-neighbor-is-one-who-nurtures-wounded.html>