

“Mercy Me”
Luke 10:25-37
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The first day Nicodemus was fine. His pallor was a healthy red. He ate every bite of food given to him. He observed his new surroundings with a mildly curious attitude, and then promptly returned to his usual activities, which mostly involved swimming. The first day was fine. It was the second day when things started falling apart.

It began in the morning. I gave Nicodemus his food—a few taps of a plastic container of dried worms, and left for the day. Later that afternoon, I found Nicodemus hiding under the rocks in his bowl, his tiny back fin undulating slightly. I figured there must be something of interest under there: perhaps a bit of soggy worm or a milder temperature. It was July, after all. I tapped on the glass like a tourist in a zoo, hoping that he would want to play with me for awhile, although, if he did, I don’t know what we would have done together. Probably stared into each other’s eyes, I suppose. But Nicodemus wasn’t game for that, so I gave up.

Days three and four brought more of the same except that Nicodemus began to appear listless, swimming languidly in his bowl. And then, around day five, he stopped swimming altogether. By this time, I had convinced myself that Nicodemus was in some kind of spiritual depression, a Beta fish version of ennui. On the sixth day, that thought was revealed to be the illusion that it was. Nicodemus was back to burying himself in the rocks, and when I came home that evening, he was half buried in them and all the tapping in the world couldn’t bring him back to life.

At the time of discovery, I was mere hours away from delivering Nicodemus and two potted plants into the arms of his mother, a friend of mine who assumed that all would be well in my hands while she took a much-needed vacation. I called her, not wanting to delay the bad news, and she was forgiving, but she did have *me* flush Nicodemus in the toilet. I said a brief prayer for his soul while I held the handle down.

In the days since, I've racked my brains to come up with what I did wrong: perhaps I fed him too many dried worms or put his bowl in too shady a spot in the apartment. But all of my mental hand-wringing has amounted to no answers, just guilt. I suppose that in the grand scheme of things the death of one fish, precious though he was, is a small event, almost a non-event. Something like it probably happens every day.

I'm not so sure that we couldn't say the same thing about the man lying in the stretch of road from Jerusalem to Jericho in the story Jesus tells in this morning's scripture. In case you didn't notice, we've taken a little detour ourselves. We've been in 1 and 11 Kings for awhile, following the stories of the prophets Elijah and Elisha. And now we're in Luke again, journeying with Jesus in Ordinary Time.

In this passage, Jesus is in the midst of teaching his disciples when a lawyer stands up to test Jesus. A lawyer in this time period is more like a rabbi than a modern attorney: he's an expert, one might say an authority, in the Jewish scriptures,ⁱ and he's eager to challenge Jesus with Jesus' knowledge of the Law. He asks Jesus: "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" which would seem like an honest question, one that a curious seeker might ask a traveling teacher, but the presence of the word "test" might cause us to doubt his sincerity.ⁱⁱ Regardless of the lawyer's intention, Jesus sidesteps the question altogether and

instead poses one of his own. He turns the question back on the lawyer: “What is written in the law?” You’ve got a fancy degree, why are you asking me? And the lawyer, without skipping a beat, answers: “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.” He’s answered correctly; he knows the Law. And Jesus says: “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” Now the lesson could have stopped there: the lawyer has been outsmarted by Jesus, his ploy to prove whatever he wanted to prove has failed. But the lawyer, perhaps still smarting from his defeat—the text says he wanted to justify himself—asks another question. “And who is my neighbor?”

It’s a great question; the kind of question, I’m sorry to say, that is a little too believable coming from the mouth of a lawyer.ⁱⁱⁱ It’s the brass tacks question; the devil is in the details kind of thing. The lawyer has just recited a law that is, on the whole, expansive and open-ended, but he’s eager to close the gap. Just who is it exactly that he has to love just as he loves himself? Could you, Jesus, draw a line on a map, or give me some indication of who’s in and who’s out? But Jesus, being Jesus, decides to avoid all of the word parsing. He’s going to tell a story instead.

There was a man traveling on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, which was a windy and notoriously dangerous road, full of robbers and thieves.^{iv} The man, who is not identified in the text as having a name or a nationality, falls victim to a random act of violence on the road. He is robbed, beaten, stripped for his clothing, and left for dead. But he may yet be spared, because a priest sees him. But the priest goes to the other side of the road. And then a Levite, another righteous keeper of the

Law, surely he will assist the man! But the Levite follows suit, and he, too, crosses to the other side of the road. Now two men who keep the Law, the good, ordinary taxpaying citizens of Israel, have neglected to do what is right, but in favor of what? Of convention, of the risk of becoming unclean, of sheer busyness and distraction? Were they buried in their ipads? We don't know. The only thing that's clear is that they're not going to be the heroes of this story. A Samaritan is.

A Samaritan, a member of an ethnic group despised by the Jews of Jesus' time, is also traveling the Jerusalem-Jericho road. He also sees the man in the ditch, but this time, the witness is moved with pity. But pity doesn't quite capture the emotion. In Greek the word translated as pity literally means "feeling in the bowels."^v It's a grinding in the gut, an emotional reaction to reach out to this half-dead man. It's the Samaritan, not the keepers of the Law, who bandages the man's wounds, pours oil and wine over them, and then brings the man to an inn, and then pays the innkeeper to take care of him. Such outrageous love from such an outrageous source: the lawyer listening to Jesus tell this story must be shocked. In fact, he probably is. When Jesus asks the lawyer which of the three men—the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan—has been a neighbor to the injured man, the lawyer cannot even speak the name "Samaritan." He simply replies: "The one who has showed him mercy." And Jesus again says, "Go and do likewise."

"Go and do likewise." If it was only that easy. This story can be a hard one to glean anything new from, in part because it's so well-known. In fact, it's so well-known I would be willing to bet that somewhere in Christendom is a needlepoint pillow depicting the scene of the Samaritan helping the injured man. Kindness to strangers is a wonderful value, but this story

also serves up a fair dose of judgment, especially to those of us predisposed to be sensitive on the subject. First, there's the lawyer. He's so darn quick to assume that he can trap Jesus into an admission of ignorance. He comes off as holier-than-thou, a person with an arsenal of scriptural references at the ready, in case he should be challenged to a theological duel. And then there's the two guys on the road, the priest and the Levite, who may have had a million reasons for not stopping, but it doesn't matter—they will be forever remembered as heartless, because compassion could not find room in *their* intestines.

And the judgment can extend far beyond the confines of the story. After all, how often do any of us display the kind of compassion that the Samaritan showed the man left on the side of the road? This story calls us up short. And perhaps it should. We, too, are willing to define our neighbors as those we like—those who look, and think, and vote like us. But maybe for others, compassion already *is* a way of life. Maybe giving is what we know how to do, and we do it all of the time. There are children and parents to take care of, friends to listen to, bills to pay, hours of volunteering and housework, and that's *outside* of work. And it's never enough. There's never enough time, enough energy, enough compassion, to go around, which means that those of us who have been taught to give until there's nothing left receive so little for ourselves. Mercy then becomes a concept for other people, for the recipients of our compassion, for God to apply to everyone but us. When Jesus says, "go and do likewise" it can be a haunting reminder that we don't need. It's a red fish buried underneath the rocks in his bowl, the water quiet around him.

The funny thing about the parable of the Good Samaritan is that we tend to see ourselves in every character **except** the man

in the ditch, the one whose dignities have been stripped from him, whose life is in danger of slipping away, the one in need of help who must rely on the kindness of strangers. We'd rather be the hero, the helper, the one who gets to the save the day. If there be blood, let it not be ours. But mercy is a road with at least two directions. Some will give, and some will receive, and to find life, we must do both.

I asked my friend, the mother of Nicodemus the fish, why she gave him that name, figuring I knew the answer. She's a pastor's kid, and Nicodemus is the name of a character in the Bible. "Well," she said. "He's named after my favorite childhood book, *The Secret of Nimh*." In the gospel of John, Nicodemus is a Pharisee who first comes to Jesus at night, asking all kinds of big questions. And later, the last contact Nicodemus has with Jesus is to prepare his corpse for burial after the crucifixion. It's a small act of mercy, a bit of tenderness after all of the cruelty. The man lying on the side of the Jerusalem-Jericho road might have thought that mercy was gone from the world. But then someone stepped across. And then mercy found *him*. Amen.

ⁱ *The New Interpreter's Bible: Luke & John* (Volume IX). (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), p., 227.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ All apologies to those of this distinguished profession, but I couldn't resist.

^{iv} *New Interpreter's Bible*, 229.

^v Retrieved on 7/9/10 from <http://www.bethquick.com/pentecost7cnotes.htm>.