

Holy One, we look for You in a time of national tumult. Teach us, Lord: teach us to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with You, our God.¹ May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

“And who *is* my neighbor?”

The scribe already knows about loving God and loving neighbor. This is a rhetorical ploy, not an information-seeking question. He wants Jesus to reveal the folks with whom he stands in solidarity. He’s aiming at political entrapment: you cause your opponent to lose credibility by identifying those with whom he is affiliated, ideally groups that *your* people don’t like. We see it all the time in this election season:

You respect the folks who work on Wall Street and in the oil industry?

Then obviously you’re a tool of ruthless multinational corporations. The gleaming floor of your office is probably made from the crushed bones of endangered species and polished by the tears of the poor.

Oh, you support the labor unions and want to raise the minimum wage?

Clearly you’re a Marxist slacker who has no respect for authority or hard work. You doubtless spend your weekends reading hippie poetry and trying to dismantle everything this country stands for.

Divisions and affiliations are *everything* in a world built on power. The scribe is trying to find out with whom Jesus stands. And Jesus tells him, obliquely, in a parable about mercy. Mercy—of all the *irrelevant* things! Good Lord, mercy is the *last* thing a political leader should consider in a dangerous time such as the first century ... or the twenty-first. Mercy makes you weak. Mercy blurs the lines. We need to stay clear on the distinctions between insider and outsider, friend and enemy. That's the way of the world.

But it's not the way of God.

The scribe tries to test Jesus, but as it turns out, Jesus is the one administering the exam. You know the story: a man robbed, beaten, left for dead. Priest sees him and passes by. Levite sees him and passes by. *Samaritan* sees him—surely that despised outsider is going to ignore him too.² But no: the Samaritan is moved with compassion. He binds his wounds; takes him to an inn; gives the innkeeper money in advance and promises to pay even more if necessary.

Who was a neighbor to the injured man? Through clenched teeth, the scribe hisses, “the one who showed him mercy.”

“Go and do likewise,” Jesus says. How offensive! The wise religious authority is supposed to imitate a Samaritan? And more: if the Samaritan is the neighbor, then the scribe is supposed to *love him as himself*? Ridiculous! This hated foreigner is the example story for a teacher of Torah?

Yes. Showing *mercy* across every line the scribe had learned to guard: theological, ritual, ethnic.

Jesus' parables may seem simple, but they are designed to change how we imagine reality. Everyday images, simple plots ... then *wham!*, a new perspective on life in the kin-dom of God.³ The parables dramatically reconfigure what we are supposed to think about power, value, and community. They shatter our expectations,⁴ holding us accountable⁵ in unexpected ways that make us uncomfortable. Parables “disorient and reorient our lives.”⁶

Maybe this morning is a good time to reorient our lives. It's been a hard week. The violence just *does not end* any more. We barely have a moment to catch our breath before the next horrific story becomes “breaking news” on our 24-hour news channels.

We've seen wrenching videos of two Black men gunned down: Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and Philando Castile in Falcon Heights, Minnesota. Both men had family and friends who are devastated. The list of victims we can name in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement is getting just absurdly long, at this point. And of course others were brutally killed this past week: Dallas police officers Lorne Ahrens, Michael Krol, Michael J. Smith, Brent Thompson, and Patrick Zamarripa were gunned down while serving their community at a peaceful

protest. These men, too, leave behind families and friends whose hearts have been forever broken.

Protests are going on across the country: tears and rage and shouts of “no justice, no peace” from Philadelphia to Atlanta to Baton Rouge, from Rochester to St. Paul to Phoenix. Fear is rampant in communities of color; you can watch testimonies on YouTube from Black men and women terrified that they will be the next to die. Fear pervades the ranks of law enforcement as well: police are heavily armed and poised on a hair-trigger of anxiety, many with inadequate training in community policing and conflict de-escalation.

So many emotions! We are outraged at the taking of innocent Black lives in city after city, month after month, year after year. We are zealous for racial justice, ready to march and shout our protest in the public square. We are awash in grief, overcome by the anguish and woundedness of our communities. We are worn down by dread as story after story of needless violence unfolds.

Outrage. Grief. Fear.

How do Christians live in this reality,

in this tinderbox of threat and raw emotion,

and continue to bear witness to the love of God in Christ Jesus?

I don't have a solution.

But I do know that compassion for the Other must be energized by an unflinching challenge to White privilege and class inequity. So I encourage you to steep yourself in art and writing and speeches that teach *racial justice*.

I know that organizing for justice must be fueled by a love that reaches boldly across barriers. So I encourage you to steep yourself in music, poetry, and spiritual practices that teach *love and mercy* across every line of difference.

And I know that rhetorics of hate must yield to mutual learning and action grounded in mercy. So I encourage you to be in a humble posture of *listening*. Listen to those who lament. Listen to those who cry out their rage and despair and fear.

Now, did *you* know that if you meditate on a parable over a sustained period of time, it will start changing you from within? I guarantee it. There may be no guarantees in this life, but that's one thing I promise you. So I encourage you—I *dare* you—to return to the parable of the Good Samaritan when you feel yourself being caught up in vicious rhetoric that batters political opponents.

- Read the parable every night before you turn on the evening news—seriously, every night!
- Return to the parable when you overwhelmed by grief at the unspeakable losses folks have suffered.
- Return to the parable when you are filled with dread about our culture of violence.

When you are outraged ... grieving ... fearful:

let the parable of the Good Samaritan *remake you*.

Let it transform your outrage into righteous zeal for justice.

Let it settle into your grief as a balm, strengthening you to bear witness to
the terrible truth of loss.⁷

Let it illumine the darkness of your fear, so you can see the path forward
toward a community constituted by love.

Return to the parable of the Good Samaritan again and again. Let it

reform your heart,

refresh your soul,

revive your strength,

and renew your mind,⁸

until *everything in you* testifies to the truth of the One who is all compassion⁹:

Jesus Christ, to whom be honor, glory, and praise, now and forever. Amen.

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10 July 2016

Proper 10C

Amos 7:7-17, Psalm 82, Col 1:1-14, Luke 10:25-37

Preached at St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut

¹ See Micah 6:8, another majestic summary of the Law.

² The Gospel of Luke has made clear the political and religious hostility between Jews and Samaritans prior to our parable. In Luke 9, Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem by entering a village of the Samaritans, but they do not receive him; the indignant disciples beg Jesus to let them “command fire to come down from heaven and consume” the Samaritans. John R. Donahue notes in *The Gospel in Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988), “After the Babylonian exile the Samaritans had opposed the restoration of Jerusalem and in the second century B.C. had helped the Syrian rulers in their wars against the Jews. In Sirach ... the Samaritans are called ‘no nation,’ and in 128 B.C. the Jewish high priest burned the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim. In the early first century A.D. the Samaritans scattered the bones of a corpse in the temple during Passover, defiling the temple and preventing the celebration of the feast” (130).

³ I find beautiful the reworking of “kingdom” as “kin-dom.” Obviously the two words are different in meaning; in the Lord’s Prayer, the second term is not biblical in any translational sense. But for me, the older term resonates even when the reworked term is used, due to the enduring power of “kingdom” in English-speaking ecclesial cultures, so saying or singing the new term creates a dialogical experience in my theological imagination. “Kin-dom” amplifies the old monarchical language with language of mutual relations in love, so that hierarchy is no longer the sole referent for the “kingdom” metaphor’s vehicle. I first encountered “kin-dom” in Mark A. Miller’s musical setting of the Lord’s Prayer (© 2008 Abingdon Press). A fine choral rendition, with the composer himself at the piano, can be found [here](#).

⁴ Donahue makes the point repeatedly in his *The Gospel in Parable*. See, for example, Donahue on the sower/seed and mustard seed parables, p. 34 (“the expectation of the hearer is shattered”) and p. 38 (“The processes of nature tell us what the kingdom of God is ‘like,’ and alteration of these same processes shatters the mold into which we try to fit the kingdom”); on the parable of the unmerciful servant, p. 77 (“What is called for is a totally new way of viewing the world which shatters misunderstandings of the justice of God”); and p. 144 on normative social boundaries being shattered in Luke 14. Richard Lischer says that the parable of the Good Samaritan “immediately creates expectations in the listener, then violates them” (*Reading the Parables* [Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014], 121.)

⁵ In *Reading the Parables*, Lischer describes parables as “tiny, stylized narratives,” “notoriously puzzling” and characterized by “opacity,” whose point, in each case, cannot be reduced to a single message or teaching (3-4). The parables fixed in writing in the New Testament “are frozen transparencies of a ministry so dynamic

that it was defined by dialogue and conflict” (7). Lischer urges that we read “the parables in such a way that we are held accountable by them” (1).

⁶ Donahue, *Gospel in Parable*, 16; Donahue is discussing Paul Ricoeur’s work on the parables of Jesus.

⁷ I’ve found pastorally insightful this resource on the importance of bearing witness to trauma: Shelly Rambo, [*Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*](#) (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010).

⁸ See Romans 12:2, to which I add vv. 14 and 21 in that same chapter: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.... Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

⁹ From the 18th-century Charles Wesley hymn, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” (#657 in the Episcopal *Hymnal 1982*), verse 1: “Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure, unbounded love thou art.”