

**“Are We Samaritans?”**  
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**July 14, 2019**

*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.”*

Carol Howard Merritt, Presbyterian Minister and popular writer, told a wonderful story a few years ago about a pastor and her congregation grappling with the complex challenges of “loving one’s neighbor” in 21<sup>st</sup> century America:

*Betsy was a pastor in a town with a growing Muslim population. For a while the new immigrants were not very visible, and they kept their religious practices to themselves. But then the community that gathered for Friday prayers in a community college classroom bought a piece of land off of the main thoroughfare, a quarter of a mile away from the bustling downtown and hired architects to draw up plans for a modest mosque. The mosque would start out as a basic concrete block structure, but it would have room to expand.*

*When a neighborhood group heard about the plan, its members began doing everything that they could to stop the construction. When the group couldn’t halt construction, it tried to make sure that the mosque stayed out of sight. The neighbors called for zoning laws that would limit certain types of architecture and require a large hedge to hide the building from the road.*

*Each morning, as Betsy scrolled through the news on her local paper’s homepage, she cringed as she read the letters from people angry about the mosque. Betsy had been working with an interfaith group for over ten years, and she had never encountered the outright hostility that was being directed against the Muslim community.*

*She knew that things had become much more difficult for Muslims in the United States since 2001. At the interfaith meetings, a local imam had spoken of the discrimination Muslims faced. That discrimination seemed to be increasing as people heard about plans for the mosque. Some members of the mosque were denied a rental property. Muslim women became worried about wearing burqas because they had endured racist verbal attacks on the street erupting from passing cars. Girls had been pressured to take off their hijabs in school. Muslim*



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children had been bullied at school, and when the parents complained, the administration didn't respond.

Sickened by what was happening in the community, Betsy longed to do something. That Sunday, the Gospel text was the story of the Good Samaritan. Betsy asked what the congregation's response should be to the person who had been beaten and left on the side of the road. She told of the difficulties that the Muslim community had endured over the decade and explained how it was time for the congregation to show love and compassion for people who were different. Reviewing American history, Betsy elucidated how Catholics and Jews had been treated poorly and said that Muslims were suffering the same plight. Betsy said that residents needed to have face-to-face conversations with the Muslims in the community. She also explained the meaning of separation between church and state and the need to safeguard religious liberties.

Since Betsy had always worked hard to work across interfaith lines and had made it clear that this was one of her core commitments, she didn't expect there would be any problems with her message in the congregation. But in the fellowship hall afterward she could feel the tension.<sup>1</sup>

Let's think about this story in terms of the *Parable of the Good Samaritan*. And the place to start is *Evolutionary Psychology*.

You see, many contemporary interpreters of this text suggest that the **evolution of our concept of survival** (over the course of human evolutionary history) and **how this concept affects how we relate to others** comes out in Luke 10, when an earnest lawyer referred to the second commandment (Lev. 9:18) and asked Jesus, “[But] who is my neighbor?”

The story Jesus told in response sheds light on our *instincts* toward both our own safety and our neighbor. In our time we seem to take for granted that the word *neighbor* can include all of humanity, but in Jesus' day people didn't think in such abstractions. Instead they might have asked themselves: *Is my neighbor a kinsman or kinswoman, a person bound to me by obligation, a member of my tribe? Can even my nation's rivals and occupiers be neighbors?*

Jesus answered the lawyer—and 21st-century Christians—with a story about a man who was attacked and nearly killed by bandits. A priest and a Levite each passed by the man without stopping. But a third man, a Samaritan, was “*moved with pity*” (a visceral word in Greek) and stopped, bound up the man's wounds and took him to an inn. *Which one of these three men was a neighbor to that bleeding man*, Jesus asked?

This story has often been given an unnecessary and *anti-Semitic* interpretation. We're told that the *priest* and the *Levite* were bound by Jewish purity laws that prevented them from having contact with corpses or human blood, as if their Jewishness forced them to be **heartless**. *But the story is simpler and clearer when we view it from an evolutionary perspective.*

Researchers know that scenarios like this one trigger *evolutionary instincts* for *self-preservation* and *genetic survival*. A bleeding, possibly dead man on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a clear indication of danger. His attackers might have been close by, or he might have been in league with them, seeking to lure softhearted travelers. *The*

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Howard Merritt, “*Politics in the Pulpit? Case by Case*,” *The Christian Century*, March 14, 2014

*priest and the Levite were not doing anything shocking in passing by, and the Samaritan was going against powerful instincts in stopping to help.*

In fact, evolutionary science has found interesting data on our tendency to help members of *our own clan* or *ethnic group*. *Racism*, if that's the right word, has been discovered even among rhesus monkeys. Apparently we humans evolved to see the difference between those *bound to us by blood and ethnicity* and those *not bound to us, and we share our scarce resources accordingly*. The pity that the Samaritan feels is a consequence of evolution, a feeling that is adaptive when aimed at *his children, kin and clan* but dangerously *irrational* when it spills over toward a stranger.

So, the Samaritan *violated* the norms of *genetic selfishness*. *First*, he reached across an ethnic line that was very real in those days (Jesus' audience would have identified the victim as Jewish). *Then* he spent his own money on the care of a stranger and even trusted an innkeeper whose reliability he hadn't established.

In the world of evolutionary psychology, *the coins* the Samaritan gave for the man's care might just as well have been *tossed into the sea* for all the good they did his own genes (unless a fertile woman was watching and jumped to the conclusion that he was rich; *seriously, people make this argument!*).

Most remarkably, however, Jesus concluded his parable by asking his interlocutor: *Which of these three acted as a neighbor?* Jesus left the door open to the sorts of rationalizations we make (rationalizations are another thing evolution made us good at) and asked the man whether he admired the example Jesus had put before him.<sup>2</sup>

A year or two ago I read about a twelve-year-old Palestinian boy, Ahmad Khatib, who had been shot and killed by Israeli soldiers during street fighting near his house in Jenin, the West Bank. The boy had been holding a *toy gun*. He was taken to an Israeli hospital, where he died after two days. His parents made the decision to allow his organs to be harvested for transplant to *Israelis*. Six people received his heart, lungs, kidneys, including a two-month-old infant. His moth, Abla, said, *"My son has died. Maybe he can give life to others."* These parents made their own journey into the compassion of God and were living eternal life.<sup>3</sup>

Reflecting on this remarkable human instinct, New Testament scholar (who is Jewish), Amy-Jill Levine, insists:

*We should think of ourselves as the person in the ditch and then ask, "Is there anyone, from any group, about whom we'd rather die than acknowledge, 'She offered help' or 'He showed compassion?' More, is there any group whose members might rather die than help us? If so, then we know how to find the modern equivalent for the Samaritan. To recognize the shock and possibility of the parable in practical, political, and pastoral terms, we might translate its first-century geographical and religious concerns into our modern idiom.*<sup>4</sup>

[Like: *Liberal, Conservative, Capitalist, Socialist, Communist, Male, Female, Muslim, Jew, Catholic, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Secular Humanist, Gay, Straight, Transgender, Urban, Rural, Town, Suburban, Southern, Northern, Young, Old, Black, White, Asian, Hispanic, Indigenous, etc.*]

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<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Dueholm, *Sunday, July 14<sup>th</sup>, Luke 10:25-37*, The Christian Century, July 2, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> James A. Wallace, *Luke 10:25-37, Feasting On the Word*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2010, pp. 241, 243.

<sup>4</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006), pp. 148-49.

Friends, Jesus of Nazareth didn't know anything about *evolutionary psychology*, but he knew all about *danger and safety, selfishness and generosity, racism and prejudice*. He knew how the movement of pity in our guts was confined and channeled to those people who could some-day return the favor. He was very attuned to a world of humans who had evolved to walk on the other side of the road as quickly and discreetly as possible.

Yet he invited his hearers to imagine whether that movement of pity might not open us to the humanity of the *stranger*, whether the powerful bond of love and obligation might also tie us together *across ethnic lines, across family lines and across lines of safety*. And just as important, he left his hearer to answer for himself:

*Are an ungoverned movement of pity and the bond that results worth embracing?*