

Jon Hauerwas – July 10, 2016 – “Disrupting the Flow”  
Luke 10: 25-37 (Good Samaritan)

Stories become memorable and capture our imaginations for any number of reasons. William Shakespeare, for instance, was a master storyteller who could easily blend elements as seemingly disparate as tragedy and love, humor and adventure, drama, wit, and surprise. The characters that he developed, the plots that he crafted, and the messages that he promoted made Shakespeare a household name.

Many of his plays remain seeped in our collective consciences, even if, today, they are often popularized for new generations through the reimagining of Hollywood. And yet, some stories are so well known that our perceived familiarity with them threatens to undermine the power of their message. Just take Romeo and Juliet, for instance.

This couple has become synonymous with forbidden love. But, like every great story, the telling of their relationship is layered with meanings. Meanings that often get lost in the seeming familiarity. And in our rush to the well-known conclusion, we forget about Shakespeare’s treatment of fate, destiny, youth, gender, family, conflict, and societal pressures.

The same is also true of so many passages in the Bible. We think that we know them so well that we forget about the nuance and the layers of meaning. In the end, we celebrate a clever Jesus who once again outwitted his opponents when speaking about the nature of love. And because it feels good to be on the winning team, (Cleveland Cavaliers, anyone?) and we are here in God's house, it is easy for us to celebrate our own cleverness in choosing to follow him. But, when today's gospel lesson, the story of the Good Samaritan, is reduced to Jesus' cleverness or becomes yet another example of loving our neighbor, then its power has been compromised.

Here, I want to tell you a story. On June 23 of this year, a group of eight inmates were in a holding cell in the basement of a Texas district court, awaiting their appearances before the judge. They were having a conversation with the guard when, suddenly, the guard slumped down in his chair and became motionless. Immediately, the men began to yell for help. <sup>1</sup>

But, because they were in the basement, they were not easily heard. Next, they devised another plan. Together, the men, all still in handcuffs, broke through the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/texas-inmates-break-out-cell-save-guard-who-stopped-breathing-n606491>. Accessed July 9, 2016.

flimsy holding cell lock, retrieved the guard's radio, and called out for help. Later, one of the inmates, who described himself as a meth addict often landing in jail, worried that other jailers would come after them with guns drawn and that they would be in trouble for breaking out. And yet, prior to the inmate's intervention, medical officials say that the guard had stopped breathing, and that he showed no signs of a pulse.<sup>2</sup>

Upstairs, deputies responded by calling for emergency personnel who performed CPR on the jailer and used a defibrillator to shock his heart. The guard has now recovered fully, and the inmates have been praised for their altruistic actions. "They definitely saved his life. There's no doubt about that," offered one sheriff's official.<sup>3</sup>

And now, with this modern day account fresh in our ears, I invite you to recall with me our gospel lesson this morning. Here, we learn that "an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus." In those days, there was no distinction between civil and religious law. In other words, this man, whose intention was "to test," was an expert in the Law of Moses. He was a scholar. A person of prominence. Someone who

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

could rightly interpret scripture for the purpose of arbitration in both civil and religious matters.<sup>4</sup>

The man's question is this: "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" In response, Jesus has the man answer his own question, saying, "what is written in the Law?" "How do you read it?" The man responds rightly, saying, "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." So far, Jesus and the legal expert are in full agreement. "Do this," says Jesus, "and you will live." Live, of course, being synonymous with the original question about inheriting eternal life.

But, the conversation doesn't end there. "Wanting to justify himself," the man asked Jesus "And who is my neighbor?" And this is where Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan.

"The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notoriously dangerous. It descended nearly 3,300 feet in 17 miles. The road ran through narrow passes at points, and the terrain offered easy hiding for bandits who terrorized travelers."<sup>5</sup> We said earlier

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<sup>4</sup> Alan Culpepper, *Luke, The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume IX*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 1996), Pg. 227.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 229.

that relating to the characters in a story is a key component in having that story remain with us. And in Jesus' story, the main character is merely said to be "a certain man." We know nothing about his nationality, religion, or ethnicity. It is the kind of description that any of us could relate to. This man represents us, in the wrong place at the wrong time.<sup>6</sup>

"This unfortunate man has been stripped, beaten, and left for dead. His assailants had left him with nothing to identify his status except his desperate need."

<sup>7</sup> Next, three different men passed by this unfortunate man on the roadside. The first are a priest and Levite, members of the religious establishment. It would be easy to call them out for lacking the ethics or morals to help this man. But, "the body on the roadside could have been a plant by robbers to trap a traveler. And certainly contact with a corpse would have defiled the priest and the Levite and disqualified them from their temple responsibilities. When they saw this man, then, theirs was a choice between duty to this man or duty to their profession." Both of them passed along and went their way.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 229.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 229.

<sup>8</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Luke, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. ed. James L. Mays. (John Knox Press: 1990), Pg. 151.

Jews often told stories in patterns of three. After hearing about the priest and the Levite, they would have been expecting to hear about the ordinary Israelite hero, the one in the pews. This would have given the story an anti-clerical ring. But, Jesus didn't do that at all. He upended expectations and disrupted the flow by saving the hero designation for a Samaritan.<sup>9</sup>

You may recall the story where Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman at the well. She says to Jesus, “why is it that that you, an Israelite, are speaking with me, a woman of Samaria? Don't you know that Samaritans and Israelites are not to do this?” The differences between Jews and Samaritans were religious and ethnic, and they kept their distance.

Earlier, I gave the example of the modern day Samaritan – those inmates who helped their own jailer. But, even that example doesn't go far enough. Because this Samaritan put the wounded man on his own donkey, changed his travel plans, took him to an inn, paid two denarii (or two days wages) for the man's care, and promised the innkeeper more if it was needed. Who is our neighbor?

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 229.

Friends, the Christian church as we know it today has been profoundly impacted by this passage and by others like it. Yesterday morning, I was pulling weeds in my garden as my six year old son looked on and spoke with me. “Daddy,” he said, “Kevin is our neighbor.” “That’s right,” I said. “He lives in the house next door.” “But,” Liam continued, “did you know that everyone is our neighbor, even if they don’t live next door?” He was clearly telling me what he had learned at Vacation Bible School, and I could not have been more proud.

This week, our country has witnessed the police shootings of two black men, protests in cities across our land, and the killing of five police officers in Dallas. And with all of this in mind, I invite you to hear this response from John Lewis, civil rights activists and member of the U.S. House of Representatives. “We are one people, one family, one house, we must learn to live together as brothers and sisters. If not, we will perish.”<sup>10</sup>

This, of course, is also Jesus’ message. For to perish is the opposite of inheriting eternal life. To have life to the fullest, both in this world and in the world

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<sup>10</sup> <https://twitter.com/repjohnlewis>. Accessed July 9, 2016.

to come, Jesus instructs us to “go and do.” May it be so and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.