

- 1. WELL.** We've just listened to a short story by Jesus that we've all heard before—probably not once or twice, but again and again.

The Parable as religious-sounding Aesop's Fable, complete with built in "moral"—THIS take on THAT hearing is deeply ingrained, and very hard to shake.

To wit: Within the tale itself there is a POOR guy, two BAD guys, and a GOOD guy—the last of whom is honored in the title under which the story is filed: THE GOOD SAMARITAN.

Standing outside the story are two other characters:

Storyteller Jesus—the Quintessential Good Guy,
and the story-hearing lawyer—a not so great-sounding guy,
whom the Storyteller Good Guy, by using this parable,
is trying to encourage toward becoming a better-sounding, eternal-life-inheriting sort of guy.

For all of us who listen in on this tale within a tale,
the moral isn't just obvious, it's very explicit: **GO AND DO LIKEWISE.**
- 2. Go and do WHAT, exactly? And precisely HOW?**

The sentiment is laudable, but the devil's in the details, is it not?

Aesop's Fable morals always read like righteous-sounding bumper stickers.

Pretty hard to take exception to—

But, in a world shot through with complex conditions and conflicting values,
pretty hard to translate into patterns of personal practice, let alone of social policy.

Case in point:

Are we supposed to go from **GO AND DO LIKEWISE** to **OPEN BORDERS ON IMMIGRATION?**
If not THAT far, at least as far as **GIVE TO THOSE WHO ASK FOR MONEY AT STOP LIGHTS?**

The underlying problem here, however, is the widely-held tendency
to treat what is called "a parable" as though it WERE an Aesop's Fable—
a superficial slice of life trotted out to serve as a simplistic moral finger-wag.

But that is EXACTLY what the stories Jesus tells are NOT.

Aesop's Fables seek to rein in imagination, to restrict its focus:

SEE HERE! Don't get distracted! Do as you've been told.

The Parables of Jesus do just the opposite—they try to release and stir up imagination.

*Pay close attention! What do YOU observe? Now, look over HERE—see THAT?
What ELSE does IT show you? Where might all this lead?*

In this case, the lawyer comes to the "neighbor" question, as I did just now, with beady eyes—
Who IS my neighbor, and who ISN'T? Tell me! My eternal life depends on getting it RIGHT!

To which Jesus responds: *Take another look, there's SO much more to see!*

*Once upon a time a man took a danger-fraught journey from Jerusalem to Jericho.
Watch it unfold. NOW, look closely, where did YOU see NEIGHBOR LOVE at work?*

3. When I look again at the scene Luke's Jesus pictures for us,
I don't see Jesus pinning moral merit or demerit badges on any of His characters.
They are all caught up in the business we call living, all are focused on what they see and don't.
- The traveler—he cannot be naïve about the dangers of this journey.
But he has to go; make the trip,
so he attends with care to the treacherous terrain, step by tentative step;
He doesn't see the bandits until they are on top of him.
 - The religious leaders, priest and Levite—they've got places to go and things to do as well.
They could also be on high alert for bandits, with eyes for little else.
They may be worried about a dilemma of their own.
Viewed one way, touching a corpse would render them ceremonially unclean;
But viewed another, they also have a religious duty to see that their dead were buried.
In any case, all they can manage to spare the robbery victim is a hurried, passing glance.
And passing by, as they do "on the other side,"
they don't really SEE the man who, having been stripped,
has no recognizable identity—and thus no particular connection with them anyway.
 - It's not likely he sees THEM, since they are ON the "other side."
And, if he does, being "half dead,"
he'll hardly have the energy to snag their attention with a shout.
 - The Samaritan—like all the others, he needs his eyes on road, and an eye out for trouble.
The only difference is that, in response to another object in his field of vision,
he "comes near" and zeros in his attention on the man half dead.
And doing so, he becomes even more vulnerable to the bandits
than the man they had just mugged.
4. The irony in this two-layered story is that the Samaritan—
The one to whom the lawyer doesn't give a second look—
This Samaritan whom the lawyer cannot even bring himself to name—
It is this very Samaritan who brings not just a close, but a compassionate eye
to the robbery victim who, as he lies on the ground, bears no sign of identification—
no way by means of which he can demonstrate that he merits the mercy he receives.
This Samaritan, however, hasn't time for seeking such identifications anyway.
He's too focused on tending the man's wounds, transporting him to safety,
monitoring his healing, and seeing to his continuing care.
5. GO AND DO LIKEWISE. I seriously doubt that what Jesus was instructing the lawyer to do,
was to rush right out on a journey from Jerusalem to Jericho,
to find another a robbery victim that he can tend just like the Samaritan did.
But can't you just see the lawyer hearing Jesus's words that way,
and dutifully undertaking the assignment?
Gritting his teeth, somehow successfully completing his risky mission, heaving a huge sigh,
and blurting out: *Oh GOOD, been there, done that, Eternal Life—CHECK.*

Jesus is much more interested in blowing the lawyer's imagination wide open.

A journey that is much more risky than simply hitting the Jericho road.

This journey in imagination Jesus tries to start him on begins with a different set of questions:

- NOT: *What must I do to inherit Eternal Life?*
BUT: *What does Eternal Life look like, and how might I come to recognize it?*
- NOT: *Who IS my neighbor?*
BUT: *What does it mean to BE a neighbor?*
- NOT: *What must I do to show that I love God and neighbor?*
BUT: *What can I do to share with others the LOVE and MERCY within which God holds me?*

6. In effect, Jesus is telling this very intelligent and very well-defended lawyer that he has been, as the saying goes, "looking for love in all the wrong places," and doing his best—with great success—to earn Eternal Life in all the wrong ways. Jesus has as much compassion for this well-dressed lawyer, as the Samaritan has for the robbed and stripped and beaten half-dead man. *You're trying too hard, He tells the lawyer gently, kindly; but you're barking up the wrong tree. Remember what Moses tells his people, just before they enter the promised land? Surely this LOVE commandment is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not way up in heaven, neither is it way off beyond the sea. No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. So, don't go looking far and wide for abstract definitions that constrict your vision. Pay attention to what is going before your eyes. Do THAT—then act out of the compassion that God has bestowed on you!*

7. Does the kind of imagination for which Jesus is trying to shape story space HAVE implications for thorny issues from immigration reform to poverty and homelessness?

Indeed it does.

It does NOT mean that we can wrap up any particular partisan policy proposal in the exclusive sanction of the Great Commandment, claiming that this chosen strategy is the best and only way to embody love of God and neighbor.

It DOES mean, however, that, as citizen Christians, we will deliberately bring the Samaritan's vision to issues of social policy and acts of personal practice.

And it means THIS this, for sure:

When we allow our imaginations to be shaped by the story form of Jesus; we WILL attend to those in need with Samaritan awareness.

What we will NOT do, for the Love of God, is "pass by on the other side."