

**TIME AFTER PENTECOST: LECTIONARY 15 (PROPER 10) (C-RCL)  
July 14, 2019**

**Deuteronomy 30:9-14; Psalm 25:1-9; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37  
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Ecumenical Prayer Cycle: Djibouti, Somalia**

“If My Neighbor Is a Martian, What Should I Do?” That was the title of our 2018 spring gathering against violence, sponsored by the Greater Lowell Interfaith Leadership Alliance – or GLILA. The subtitle was “Leaving our comfort zones to overcome our fears.” Through a panel presentation and small group discussion, we considered several questions:

- \* *“What’s a story I know about overcoming (possibly deeply held) misconceptions?”*
- \* *“What’s a story I can share about having the curtain of fear or misunderstanding removed?”*
- \* *“What’s my story of someone’s being included (especially) when different from the rest of the group?”*

“And who is my neighbor?” asked the lawyer of Jesus in today’s Gospel. The lawyer most likely wasn’t worried about having a Martian as neighbor, but through the question, “Who is my neighbor”, the lawyer might really have been asking, “Who is *not* my neighbor?” “For whom do I *not* have to show concern?”

In reply, Jesus told this parable: “A person 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.” [Luke 10:30] This person was *literally* “going down” from Jerusalem to Jericho. When he started at Jerusalem, the road was 2,300 feet above sea-level; the Dead Sea near Jericho –

his destination – is 1,300 feet *below* sea-level. In little more than 20 miles, this road drops nearly 3,600 feet. It’s a rocky road with narrow passageways and sudden turns – all of which make it attractive to outlaws. [William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), p. 141] And so these robbers stripped everything away from this person – clothing, possessions, dignity, identity – and nearly his life.

But “by chance,” Jesus said. By chance a priest was also going down that road. (This priest would not have had a vocation in the sense we may think of today; rather the priesthood is an inherited position in Judaism, with the priestly line descending from Moses’ brother, Aaron.) Would help come from the priest? Well, no; not only did he *not* stop to help, he went out of his way to avoid the victim, passing by on the other side. Then a Levite was going down that road. (We note parenthetically that, like the priests, Levites also receive their role through inheritance. Levites assist the priests and serve the congregation. [R. Abba, “Priests and Levites”, *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 3, K-Q, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 879]) Would the *Levite* stop? No! He, too, went out of his way to avoid the victim, perhaps even putting a hand to his face to shield himself from the sight of that battered person.

Those who heard Jesus’ parable would have *expected* both the priest and the Levite to assist the battered victim. After all, both of them would have known the Scripture (found in Leviticus [19:18]) with its command to “love your neighbor as yourself”; not only that, but they would have known that the Scripture (found in the same chapter of Leviticus [19:34]) also carried the

command to “love the *alien* as yourself.” Some commentators have suggested that the reason the priest and Levite didn’t stop to help had to do with purity regulations – especially if there were the possibility that the victim was dead. If that were the case, then if the priest were to touch the dead body, he would be ritually unclean for seven days, [Numbers 19:11] thus losing his turn of duty in the Temple.

However, Amy-Jill Levine, Jewish New Testament Scholar, warns against this interpretation. In her book, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, she notes that the text clearly states that the priest was going “down” from Jerusalem, and that, therefore, there was no need for him to be in a ritually pure state. True, he might have been concerned about ritual purity had he been going “up” to Jerusalem, but that was not the case here. [Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, © 2014 by Amy-Jill Levine), pp. 100-101.]

She then adds that the best explanation she’s heard for the reason that neither the priest nor the Levite came to the aid of the victim comes from Martin Luther King, Jr. I’m grateful for this reference that led me to King’s “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” the address he delivered at Bishop Charles Mason Temple on April 3, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee, where he had gone to support striking sanitation workers. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.:

Now, you know, we use our imagination a great deal to try to determine why the priest and the Levite didn't stop. At times we say they were busy going to a church meeting, an ecclesiastical gathering, and they had to get on down to Jerusalem so they wouldn't be late for their meeting. (*Yeah*) At other times we would speculate that there was a religious law that one who was engaged in religious ceremonials was not to touch a human body twenty-four hours before the ceremony. (*All right*) And every now and then we begin to wonder whether maybe they were not going down to Jerusalem, or down to Jericho, rather, to organize a Jericho Road Improvement Association. [*Laughter*] That's a possibility. Maybe they felt it was better to deal with the problem from the causal root, rather than to get bogged down with an individual effect. [*Laughter*]

But [King continues] I'm going to tell you what my imagination tells me. It's possible that those men were afraid. You see, the Jericho Road is a dangerous road. (*That's right*) I remember when Mrs. King and I were first in Jerusalem. We rented a car and drove from Jerusalem down to Jericho. (*Yeah*) And as soon as we got on that road I said to my wife, "I can see why Jesus used this as the setting for his parable." It's a winding, meandering road. (*Yes*) It's really conducive for ambushing.... In the days of Jesus it came to be known as the "Bloody Pass." And you know, it's possible that the priest and the Levite looked over that man on the ground and wondered if the robbers were still around. (*Go ahead*) Or it's possible that they felt that the man on the ground was merely faking (*Yeah*), and he was acting like he had been robbed and hurt in order to seize them over there, lure them there for quick and easy seizure. (*Oh yeah*) And so the first question that the priest asked, the first question that the Levite asked was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" (*All right*)

[Source: MLKEC, INP, Martin Luther King, Jr. Estate Collection, In Private Hands, NYC-4A & 4B in <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/ive-been-mountaintop-address-delivered-bishop-charles-mason-temple>, accessed 7.10.2019]

Reaching out with aid *can* be serious business, with consequences. On April 4, 1968, the evening after delivering this address, as he was getting ready for dinner, Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated.

But, beloved people, fear – with that perpetual question of “what if” – can indeed paralyze us; it *can* keep us from acting even as we think we should. For instance, have there been times when you turned away from noticing someone begging for help? What about crossing to the opposite side of the street to avoid someone?

Fear can also cause us to lash out against our neighbor. Bishop James Hazelwood in his July 12<sup>th</sup> letter to pastors and deacons of the New England Synod asked all congregations of the Synod to include in their prayers this weekend the events around ICE raids and looming deportations. He suggested “that at its core, this is all about fear.” There’s obvious fear on the part of “those newly arrived in this country that they are targeted in these raids,” but there’s also the fear that “some Americans see in a changing society.” The Bishop also noted that: “The use of fear by those in power is a weapon of both political manipulation and the accumulation of power. [But, the Bishop adds:] Fear is something Jesus addressed regularly in his ministry.” [“FYI – Letter Regarding ICE Raids,” e-mail received 7.12.2019, New England Synod [bishop@nesynod.org](mailto:bishop@nesynod.org)]

So, since perhaps in fear neither the priest nor Levite stopped to help that wounded man, Jesus’ audience would have then expected a third person to stop and help. But who would that third person be? Jesus’ audience would

have expected that person to be an Israelite. [Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, © 2014 by Amy-Jill Levine), p. 103] But as we know, an Israelite *wasn't* the one who showed up next. Instead, in the way of parables that do the unexpected, it was a *Samaritan* traveler.

We have come to know this story that Jesus told as the Parable of the Good Samaritan. You've probably heard the term "Good Samaritan" used in positive ways to refer to agencies or persons engaged in acts of compassion, done with and for those in desperate need. But for Jesus' Jewish audience, a "Good Samaritan" would have been an oxymoron!

The history of animosity and hostility between Jews and Samaritans is centuries-old and complex. For one thing, the chosen place to worship has long been a major issue between Samaritans and Jews – with Mount Gerizim for the Samaritans, and with the Temple Mount in Jerusalem for the Jews.

[<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samaritans>, accessed 7.11.2019]

In the preceding chapter of Luke – which was part of the assigned Gospel just two weeks ago, Jesus had been refused hospitality in a Samaritan village "because his face was set toward Jerusalem." [Luke 9:51-56] Jesus and the disciples had *just experienced first-hand* the enmity and fear between Jews and Samaritans. That's what makes the Samaritan traveler's appearance in the parable even more shocking.

I turn once again to Martin Luther King's reflection in his "Mountaintop" address, where he continues:

But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?" That's the question before you tonight. (Yes) Not, "If I stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to my job?" Not, "If I stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to all of the hours that I usually spend in my office every day and every week as a pastor?" (Yes) The question is not, "If I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?" The question is, "If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to **them**?" That's the question. [Applause] [<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/ive-been-mountaintop-address-delivered-bishop-charles-mason-temple>, accessed 7.10.2019]

You see what changes when we focus on "them" instead of on "me"? The priest and Levite passed by "on the other side"; but the *Samaritan* came near. The priest and Levite saw someone half-dead; but the *Samaritan* saw someone who was half-alive. Through lavish personal attention, the Samaritan had compassion and thought about "them," about "the other," who was no longer a "stranger," but now brought closer as a "neighbor".

In our contemporary context, perhaps "they" – like the Jews and Samaritans in the parable – perhaps "they" are someone whose religious beliefs or political views seem intolerable to us – even dangerous. Is there anyone, from any group, from whom we would seriously *not* want to accept help – even if we were desperate? *And* is there anyone, from any group, who just wouldn't want to help *us*? – For whom our very existence is a threat? If we can think of responses to these questions, then we can begin to understand the modern equivalent of the Samaritan in today's parable. Amy-Jill Levine gives the following example, saying: "To understand the parable in

theological terms, we need to be able to see the image of God in everyone, not just members of our group.” [Amy Jill-Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, © 2006 by Amy-Jill Levine), pp. 148-149.]

[Here’s her example:] To recognize the shock and the possibility of the parable in practical, political, and pastoral terms, we might translate its first-century geographical and religious concerns into our modern idiom. The ancient kingdom of Samaria is, today, the West Bank. Thus, translated across the centuries, the parable retains the same meaning. The man in the ditch is an Israeli Jew; a rabbi and a Jewish member of the Israeli Knesset fail to help the wounded man, but a member of Hamas [“a political party whose charter not only anticipates Israel’s destruction, but also depicts Jews as subhuman demons responsible for all the world’s problems”] shows him compassion. [Amy Jill-Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, © 2006 by Amy-Jill Levine), p. 149.] [Phrase in brackets from Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, © 2014 by Amy-Jill Levine), p. 115.]

....{Or, she continues:] Were Jesus a Samaritan, we’d today have the parable of the “Good Jew,” told in the streets of Ramallah. If people in the Middle East could picture this, we might have a better vision for choosing life. [Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, © 2014 by Amy-Jill Levine), p. 115.]

Like the wounded person in today’s parable, we have been helped graciously – separately and apart from any question of whether we have a claim on this grace. We are thus enabled to be graceful toward others – to “bear fruit in every good work”. [Colossians 1:10c, NRSV] The motivation for our leading “lives worthy of the Lord, and fully pleasing to the Lord” is rooted in



the unending compassion that Jesus poured out to us. [Colossians 1:10a,b, *Readings for the Assembly*, New Revised Standard Version, Emended, Revised Common Lectionary, Cycle C (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), p. 213] We who have received this extravagant divine gift thus become neighbors who recognize the image of God in others.

But, you may be thinking, now hold on a minute, “If My Neighbor Is a Martian, What *Should* I Do?” Well, one thing *we* did at the end of that 2018 spring GLILA program was to include a ritual of commitment. On index cards, participants responded to questions such as: *What is one action you could take to leave your comfort zone in terms of someone who is different from you? What neighbor do you want to introduce yourself to? What religion would you like to learn about?* These were small actions, but perhaps in taking them, we could view a neighbor less fearfully and more compassionately.

Now, beloved, compassionate neighbors:

“Go and do likewise,” says Jesus – not only to the lawyer, but also to us.

“Go and do likewise” – knowing that you are loved – and loved extravagantly.

“Go and do likewise” – graced with God’s compassionate and tender mercy.

“Go and do likewise” – showing compassion for “them,” for the others, for the so-called “Martians” in your life, with a love that knows no boundaries.

Amen. May it be so.