

“Something More Than Right Answers”

Luke 10:25-37

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

July 10, 2022

I will never forget a conversation I had with the daughter of a parishioner in Richmond, Virginia. I had just completed the last stage of my doctoral work and was beginning to feel some relief when this lovely lady, a professor with graduate work in her past, said, “So, now is the time when you have to make good on all of the promises of things you would do when you were done!”

“Thanks a lot!” I thought, “Let me savor the moment!” She was right. I did not do the work just to get a degree. I was after the growth that takes place in a doctoral program and extends beyond the formal work. I just wasn’t ready to move on yet.

I suspect this is how the lawyer in Luke 10 feels after his first phase of Q and A with the itinerant rabbi from Nazareth. Luke says he only asks Jesus the question about eternal life to test him, but as Jesus turns the tables and asks the lawyer what he reads in the law as most important, the lawyer gives an answer he is invested in — the love of God and the love of neighbor as self.

He is invested not only in the answer but in the assumption that right answers are what it’s all about. Knowing in your head the right things about God is the key to faith. But just as he begins to feel good about himself, like yours truly finishing up a degree, Jesus looks him in the eye and says, “You have given the right answer; **do** this, and you will live.”

It is not what the lawyer expects to hear. Jesus calls him to move beyond his assumptions, beyond his ability to give right answers, into the arena of doing right. Lest there be any confusion about what this means, Jesus, as prodded by the lawyer’s question as to who his neighbor is, tells a story about a Good Samaritan. It is a story that leaves little room for misunderstanding, and it ends with Jesus’ directive to go and do likewise.

The message for us is that faith is about something more than right answers. It is about right living, putting into action what we claim to believe. Faith is revealed not in the ability to name the love of God and neighbor as important but in the way we love. This may seem obvious, but obvious does not mean easy.

One challenge we face is that we live in a time when many proceed as if matters of faith are all in the head. In the opinion of many religious leaders, what matters most is that we believe the right things about God. In the institutions of the SBC when we left, one had to confess the “right” beliefs to remain employed!

Yet, it’s not just those at one end of the ideological continuum who run the risk of allowing faith to get stuck in their heads. We all do. It is possible, for example, to know the meaning of the parable of the Good Samaritan but not live it, and thus dwell in the limited land of right answers.

In all the settings where I have served there have been folks who talked a good game of loving neighbor but didn’t play the game so well, while there have been others who have not talked well but have played just fine. I recall one setting in which there were many social liberals who spoke often of matters of justice and love but rarely showed up to work on a Habitat House, in our community garden or at a peacemaking week in a housing project.

Then, there was a lady who talked like the most bigoted caricature you could imagine, Archie Bunker in feminine form (for those who get the reference), one who saw every poor person as lazy and spoke of other races with words decent folk don’t use. Yet, when it came time to work among the poor, guess who showed up and served in a loving manner? And when I asked the African-American woman I baptized in her seventies who made her feel welcome, guess whose name she mentioned?

The way people talk about life and faith can be deceiving. Speaking the right words, giving the right answers, is only part of the equation. What matters most is how we live. Notice how the author of Colossians prays for the early church in today’s reading.

He says, "... we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you will be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, **so that** you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to God, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God."

The goal of Christian faith is not simply right belief but right living characterized by the love of God and neighbor. This is seen in the prayers of New Testament writers and in the way the early church nurtures faith. The goal in this time is formation, not just information. The goal is changed lives, and thus before baptism, believers have to demonstrate that they have changed — become more loving and kind — and friends must confirm that they have.

I am not recommending that we reinstate this prerequisite for baptism. I am not sure how many people would get to the water! But such a prerequisite does not go against the teachings of Jesus. Do this and you will live, he tells the lawyer. Follow me, he tells disciples. His goal is more than right answers. It is right living.

And yet, the perception that faith is all in the head is not the only challenge we face when it comes to loving God and neighbor; we also face the challenge of over-analysis. When thoughtful believers in the twenty-first century hear the parable of the Good Samaritan, there are various responses, including observations about the dangers of taking the parable literally.

It is risky to help someone on the road. We don't know if we are making a difference. And doesn't this parable recommend a band-aid approach? Would it not be wiser to address underlying issues that lead to poverty and violence? I read a review of a sermon that critiques the strategy of the Good Samaritan as being too individualistic, paternalistic, victim-oriented and reactionary!

Analysis is fine. And there is nothing wrong with moving beyond ministry to individuals. We are called to seek the redemption of individual and social ills. But the point of the parable is not to develop a strategy for addressing systemic issues. It is to illustrate what loving the neighbor in front of us looks like.

When confronted with a specific human need, our calling is to respond with compassion and mercy, not analysis and debate. Risk may be involved and we may not know whether we have made a lasting difference in the life of another, but few situations of genuine need come with no risks and guaranteed results.

In an old issue of *The Christian Century*, Peter Hawkins tells a story about a time when he and a friend were in New York City. They had just been to a performance of Alec McGowan's one-man *Gospel According to Mark* and were strolling along when the door of a bar opened and drunk man stumbled out. They kept him from hitting the pavement face-first, but once on his feet, the man made it quite clear that he did not want their help.

Inside the bar no one was willing to help either. So, what should they do, leave him alone as he wished and go on their way? If they hadn't just heard the gospel told in compelling form, it would have been easy to leave... So, they helped the man home. He let them know he didn't need help. He needed more to drink and something to smoke and he wanted them to get the _____ out!

His home turned out to be a gorgeous upper eastside townhouse. He had an address book full of names, but when they called some of the numbers, each person said he was a spoiled and abusive drunk. All they could do was pour out the Scotch, let him pass out and watch him until morning. This they did. They left a card, saying, "Please call if you need to talk." But he never did.

So, what is the moral of this story? Were these two would-be Samaritans taken for a ride? Did they waste their time because the man's life was not transformed? Did they prove the outdated nature of Jesus' teaching? Or did they love their neighbor if but for an evening, buy him another day of hope, and participate in the work of the kingdom of God? Hawkins says this, "Nonetheless, I wonder now if I stepped into eternal life without knowing it – by doing, however grudgingly, what had to be done."

Let me turn the story around and place myself in the role of the one in need. During our time in Warrenton, I learned one evening that one of our folks who lived at the lake had died. I

ventured out to see his family. I had been to their home before, but it had been some time and some of the roads to and around the lake were poorly marked, especially for those travelling at night.

At one point, I thought I might have missed a turn. So, I pulled into a parking lot to look at my map – there were no smart phones in this time. But rather than stopping the car, turning on an interior light, and reading the map, like any intelligent person would have done, I turned on the light and pulled out the map and kept driving through the lot, until I ended up in a ditch.

Fortunately, nothing but my ego was injured! Yet, I was unsettled, stuck in a ditch on a dark night off a deserted road when I was needed! But it was not long before four men, two white and two black... came along and offered help, laughing at my story. After expressing thanks to the men and God, I was on my way.

Did those men take a risk in stopping to help? They did. Did they overlook the possibility that I might end up in another ditch? Yes. But I was glad they did. They may not have heard the Parable of the Good Samaritan, they may not have been able to give the “right” answers to questions of faith, but in extending mercy to me, they offered something more than right answers. In so doing, they stepped into eternal life without even knowing it.

The late Thomas Troeger once said this:

Right answers are great if your mechanic is fixing your car or your physician is reading your test results. But a religion of right answers frequently becomes an attempt to control God. Instead of right answers, Christ offers us the wonder of faith: risking ourselves in prayer and action for the good of our neighbor and the Glory of God.

Indeed, Christ does offer such wonder and we are glad he does!