

“Getting the Point of the Parable”

Luke 10:25–37

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July 13, 2025

Amy-Jill Levine is a Jewish New Testament professor who until her retirement, taught at Vanderbilt Divinity School. She is an insightful scholar who brings delightful humor to everything she does. Her calling is to help people learn about the Jewishness of Jesus and the early church and thus avoid unintentional anti-Semitic understandings.

In her book *The Misunderstood Jew, The Church and the Scandal of a Jewish Jesus*, A-J includes a chapter entitled “Stereotyping Judaism” which addresses the far-too-common practice of highlighting the superior nature of Christian faith by contrasting it with a caricature of Jewish faith. For example, it has been said that the New Testament and Christian faith are about grace while the Old Testament and Judaism are about law, which sounds right but isn’t. Every covenant in the Hebrew canon is based on grace. God delivers the people before asking anything of them. God has always been gracious and kind.

One section in the chapter on stereotyping Judaism is entitled “Good Samaritans, Bad Jews, and Impure Corpses.” It speaks to the stereotyping we are tempted to embrace as we interpret the familiar parable we have read today about a Samaritan who helps a man attacked by robbers. The common pattern is to hold up the Samaritan as a hero in contrast to the two uncaring Jewish leaders who are bound by the teachings of the law. The man could be dead, the argument goes, and touching a dead body would render the priest and Levite ritually impure. We have all heard this claim, some of us have taught or preached it.

But as Levine notes, while there is scripture to suggest that corpse contamination can lead to ritual impurity, for example Leviticus 21:1-3 and Numbers 19:11, there are problems with this interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The man is not dead; the Leviticus prohibition applies to the sons of Aaron, not the sons of Levi; and sacred laws are often in conflict. The faithful are not to work on the Sabbath,

but priests must work. The faithful should not touch a corpse, but Leviticus 19:18 calls for the love of neighbor. And in Jewish tradition, burying the dead was and is a major *mitzvah* (good deed) because it is a service we render another person without expectation of reciprocation.

There are many laws, the faithful incur impurity often, but this doesn't stop them from extending compassion. It has been argued that this parable presents a challenge to the purity system of the first-century Jewish world, urging a politics of compassion, but compassion and purity are not in conflict. It may be surprising that a Samaritan extends compassion, but it is equally surprising that the priest and Levite do not. The purity code commands them to extend kindness.

The focus on corpse contamination, therefore, is misplaced; this issue is not even named in the parable. Furthermore, it distracts us from the most central part of the story which concerns the model of faith in it.

We recall the context. An expert in the law asks Jesus a question to test him — what must he do to inherit eternal life? In proper Jewish form, Jesus replies to the question with a question, “What is written in the law?” The lawyer wisely responds by referencing the love of God and neighbor from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, and Jesus says, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

The lawyer is smart but not that smart, he just can't leave it here. He has to ask another question, to vindicate himself, the text says, “And who is my neighbor?” He knows the law, he is willing to follow it, to a point, he just wants some reasonable limits on whom he must love, like most of us, but Jesus does not comply. Not only does he not establish reasonable limits; he extends neighborly love to a dreaded enemy, the Samaritans; and this is the point of the parable.

It is more than a calling to help the down and out, the wounded and vulnerable, though this is a worthy calling. But Samaritans don't fall into any of these categories. They are the enemy because of a long and complicated history. The relationship between Samaritans and Jews is mutually antagonistic. Neither wants to help the other.

So, Amy-Jill Levine suggests that to hear this parable today, 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'? And is there any group whose members would rather die than help us?" That is where we find the modern equivalent to Samaritan.

Levine goes further in saying that if we want to recognize the shock and possibility of the parable in practical, political, and pastoral terms, we might view ancient Samaria as the West Bank today. 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 shows him compassion (*The Misunderstood Jew*, pp. 148-149).

This might offend some people today, as it offends the lawyer in Luke's story. When Jesus asks him which of the three characters was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers, he cannot bring himself to say the word "Samaritan." He can only say, "The one who showed him mercy." A Samaritan? It is unthinkable! But this is what Jesus says. This is what it means to love our neighbor.

So, if we are to hear Jesus' message in this parable, the question is, "Who is other and objectionable to us? Who would we rather not receive help from, and who would rather die than offer us help?"

We might say immigrants. Some people are obsessed with viewing "them" as the enemy, despite all evidence to the contrary. Perhaps we would say Muslims. Ever since 9-11, in many people's minds, "they" are out to get "us," and to be sure, a sizable number of extremists, who view themselves as faithful Muslims, are dangerous, but they form a tiny percentage of the two billion Muslims in the world. To speak of all Muslims as the violent enemy is to violate the ninth commandment which says we must not bear false witness against our neighbor.

Or perhaps we view LGBT people and those who support them as our enemy. It seems odd that so many Christians stake their faith on a subject Jesus never addresses, while taking the side opposed to his teachings on things like helping the poor and welcoming the stranger. Or to name the most obvious dividing line, perhaps our enemy is the other political side. This used to mean Republican or Democrat, but in a time when neither party is what it was, and most people are functionally

independent, the question is — are we MAGA or anti-MAGA? But then, we could just say the Russians and Chinese, surely they are our enemies!

In regard to any of these groups, would we want to be helped by “them” and would “they” want to help “us?” That’s where the rubber hits the road when it comes to neighborly love, that’s what Jesus is getting at in this parable. It’s no wonder we have largely avoided this message and sought refuge in a little ordinary kindness which risks nothing. And yet, Jesus says, “Go and *do* likewise... *Do* this, and you will live.”

So, what do we *do*, not what do we think, but what do we *do*? Is it even possible? Only if we can overcome our fear of the other, it always seems to come down to a choice between fear and faith.

In his book *A Way Other Than Our Own*, Walter Brueggemann put it this way. He said that frightened people will never turn the world, because they use too much energy on protection of self. It is the vocation of the baptized to make the world whole:

- The unafraid are open to the neighbor, while the frightened are defending themselves from the neighbor.
- The unafraid are generous in the community, while the frightened, in their anxiety, must keep and store and accumulate, to make themselves safe.
- The unafraid commit acts of compassion and mercy, while the frightened do not notice those in need.
- The unafraid are committed to justice for the weak and the poor, while the frightened see them only as threats.

Only when we overcome our fear can we love as God would have us to, but the good news is it is possible, there are people who do this.

Writing for *Feasting on the Word* (Year C, Volume 3, pp. 241f), homiletics professor James A. Wallace tells the story of a twelve-year-old Palestinian boy named Ahmad Khatib who was shot by Israeli soldiers during street fighting near his house in Jenin in the West Bank. He was holding a toy gun. After he was shot, he was taken to an Israeli

hospital where he died. His parents decided to allow his organs to be harvested. Six Israelis received his heart, lungs, and kidneys, including a two-month-old infant. “My son has died,” his mother said, “Maybe he can give life to others.”

There are stories of people who extend amazing, God-like love not just to their neighbors but neighbors they think of as enemies, and not just in other parts of the world. Every time there is massive flooding — whether in Texas, North Carolina, or anywhere else — there are stories about people who look past their differences to help each other. When pushed to our limits, we find a spark of the Divine within us. It is possible, this God-like love is possible. That is the point of the parable, not just that we are called to such love but that we are capable of it.