

## “Three guys walk into a bar . . .”

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast  
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church  
Columbus, Ohio  
July 15, 2007*

### **Luke 10:25-37**

*At the beginning of his final journey, to Jerusalem, Jesus looked for hospitality in a Samaritan village. But the Samaritans refused. They were not about welcome some Jew on his way to Jerusalem! James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven to burn up that village. But Jesus rebuked them. In time, fire would fall on all such villages — and without help from James and John. As his journey to Jerusalem continued, Jesus had victories to celebrate, and he had tests to endure.*

[An expert in the law of Moses, let's call him] a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. He said, “Teacher, how must I have acted in order to receive life in the coming age?” Jesus said to him, “What is written in the law? How do you read it?” The lawyer answered, “You shall love the Lord your God from your whole heart and with the whole of your life, the whole of your strength, and the whole of your mind — and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus said to him, “You have answered correctly. Act this way, and you will live.” But, wanting to justify himself, the lawyer said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. And he ran into bandits, who stripped him, beat him up, and went off, leaving him half dead. By coincidence a priest was going down that road. When he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. In the same way, when a Levite came to the place and saw, he, too, passed by on the other side. But when a Samaritan who was on the road came upon the man and saw, he had compassion. He approached the man and bandaged his wounds, after pouring olive oil and wine on them. Then he put the man on his own animal, brought him to a lodging place, and took care of him. In the morning, he took out two denarii and gave them to the proprietor. He said, ‘Take care of him. Whatever extra you spend, I will pay you back when I return.’ Of these three, who seems to you to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the bandits?” The lawyer said, “The one who acted with compassion toward him.” Jesus said to him, “Go, and act the same way.”

### **Sermon**

Among other things, the latest issue of the Banner, the denominational magazine, introduces the 2007 crop of candidates for the ministry. Before those smiling faces make it onto the pages of the Banner, those candidates have a lot of tests to pass. There are course examinations, language competency exams, and a Bible knowledge test. There are oral examinations before seminary faculty and candidacy interviews. One hurdle after another to clear.

The final test for those candidates — after they have accepted a call to a church or some other ministry — is the classical examination. We have these examinations most every year in Classis Lake Erie. A key component of the classical exam is an inquiry into the candidate's “biblical and theological position” (that's the official language). At issue is this: does the candidate have a sufficient grasp of the Gospel, and does the candidate speak the Gospel with a Reformed accent?

It makes sense to examine candidates. After all, for years, even decades, to come, they will be shaping congregations. Beyond that, they will influence the direction of the entire denomination. So it makes sense to test candidates for the ministry.

But can you imagine testing Jesus? Can you imagine trying to verify his religious credentials? Can you imagine trying to find out if he is really qualified to preach? That's just what happened one Wednesday afternoon on the way to Jerusalem.

**“[An expert in the law of Moses, let’s call him] a lawyer stood up to test Jesus” (v. 25a).** I suppose there were standard questions that every rabbi and every rabbi-in-training were asked. When I was a candidate for the ministry, all of us were asked the “Adam and Eve” question. That was a big issue in the Christian Reformed Church in the 1980s. First century Judaism had its own set of questions. Some of those questions had answers that were broadly accepted. The answers to certain other questions, however, were a matter of dispute.

The first half of the conversation between Jesus and the lawyer concerned what might be termed a “consensus question and answer.” It was generally accepted that the two commandments, “Love the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 6) and “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19), provided a brisk and proper summary of the Torah, the law of Moses. When Jesus said, in Mark 12, that those two commandments summed up not only the law but also the prophets, he was commended by the scribe who had been inquiring of him. Here in Luke 10, it’s the lawyer who provides the twin-commandment summary, and Jesus commends him. “You have answered correctly,” he says. So far, Jesus and the lawyer are on the same page. Jesus has passed this part of the lawyer’s test.

Then there comes another question from the lawyer — this one is not a consensus question (and answer). He asks, “Who is my neighbor?” The answer to this question had practical and principial significance. On the practical level, the answer let you know just who you were required to put yourself out for. Certainly not for enemies of God’s people. But who exactly for? On the principial level, the answer clarified who was within the circle of God’s mercy, who was and who was not in the people of God. There was dispute about how to answer the lawyer’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” By putting that question to Jesus, the lawyer intends to find out where Jesus stands, to find out if Jesus is an ally or not.

Defining who is “in” and who is “out” remains a popular religious parlor game. We recently received here the latest newsletter from Mid-America Reformed Seminary. (Some of you may remember that Mid-America was founded in the early 1980s in response to trends in the Christian Reformed Church and at Calvin Seminary.) This Mid-America newsletter mentioned a document on the seminary’s web site that explores and responds to a number of current “errors.” I looked up the document. It’s many pages long. Three of the pages provide a thorough list of the errors of others, forty-five such errors — yes, they are numbered! Those “others” turn out to be Christians who don’t make the doctrinal grade. In an important sense, these Christians are not “in”; they are “out.”

In a not-all-that-different and infuriating move (infuriating to me, at least), the Roman Catholic Church last week unambiguously reaffirmed its conviction that the pope is the first among and first above all others, and that no body can rightly be called a “church” without first swearing allegiance to the pope. According to the statement, our church — this congregation, as well as the Christian Reformed denomination — along with many others, is not a “church” at all. We are misguided and defective. We may not be all the way “out” (some concessions are made), but we are certainly not “in.”

The lawyer has a different question for Jesus (“Who is my neighbor?”), but he’s playing the very same, all-too-serious game, toying with the question of who exactly is inside and who exactly is outside the circle of God’s mercy.

**But Jesus does not answer the lawyer’s question. He tells a story instead.** The story is familiar. A man is robbed, beaten, and left for dead — “half-dead,” Jesus says. Then, for some unmentioned reason, the injured man is ignored by both a priest and a levite, before he is finally looked after carefully and generously by a third passerby.

The story has its share of surprises. That the priest ignored the injured man, that the levite, too, ignored the injured man, was shocking. It was scandalous. Dead or alive, the man was deserving of help. The priest and the levite both simply failed to honor the injured man’s humanity. And they failed in their duty.

It was not so different from what happened last month in Wichita, Kansas. A twenty-seven year old woman had been stabbed, and she was bleeding to death — yes, she did die — on the floor of a convenience store. She tried several times to stand up, but always fell to the floor again. While she lay on the floor, bleeding to death, five customers stepped over her to do their shopping. One of those customers did stop, but only to take the dying woman's picture with her cell phone, a picture she later posted on the internet. No matter how many times something like this happens, it's still a surprise, still a shock, still a scandal. So, too, the inaction of the priest and the levite was shocking.

Then there was the third guy. Everyone listening to Jesus's story knew who that third guy would be. There was a standard form for telling a story. We say, "Three guys walk into a bar, a priest, a minister, and a rabbi." In the world where Jesus tells his story, those three guys would be a priest, a levite, and an Israelite (i.e., an ordinary "Joe"). But Jesus says, in effect, "Three guys walk into a bar, a priest, a levite, and a Samaritan." And the Samaritan turns out to be the hero of the story. That was a real surprise, because Samaritans and Jews hated each other. They had been hating each other for a long time.

In 1389, in a great Balkan battle, an army of Muslim Turks defeated an army of Christian Serbs. By their victory, the Turks planted a lasting Muslim presence in the Balkans, in the territory called Kosovo. Six hundred years later, the hatred of the 14<sup>th</sup> century remains. It erupted in the 1990s, and it has been simmering ever since. Only a NATO and UN presence has managed to keep the lid on. But the past has not been forgotten.

In the same way, there was, by the first century, a long mutual antagonism between Samaritans and Jews, an antagonism that had been lingering from the birth of the Samaritan nation in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. For eight hundred years, the antipathy lingered, occasionally boiling over, sometimes violently. Then, in Jesus's story, someone who is definitely "out" — certainly according to standard definitions of who is "in" and who is "out" of the circle of God's mercy — someone who is definitely "out" is suddenly "in," more "in" than both the priest and the levite. That was a surprise!

**Which brings us to the cutting edge of Jesus' story.** Last week I read several interpretations of the "Parable of the Good Samaritan," interpretations that turned out to be dead ends. Some interpreters read Martin Luther's personal issues and his struggle with the 16<sup>th</sup> century Roman Catholic Church back into the parable and its context. Some interpreters disregard the mutual antipathy between Samaritans and Jews in the first century. And some interpreters see overarching themes that connect with the story, but ignore Jesus's own concluding remarks after the story. Here's what I see going on in the conversation and story — remember, the story is part of a conversation — that connect Jesus and the lawyer.

First, Jesus rejects gatekeeping over the circle of God's mercy. In his own practice, Jesus came close to prostitutes, tax collectors, and "sinners." He said that these people, thought by all the standard measures to be outside the circle of God's mercy — he said that these people were the first to enter the kingdom. Then here, in the conversation and story, Jesus gives no credit to the lawyer's question. The lawyer asks a gatekeeper's question: "Who is my neighbor?" In other words, who is "in" and who is "out"? Jesus does not answer that question. Instead he responds by saying, in effect, "Go and be a neighbor." No gatekeeping at all!

[This, by the way, suggests that the circle-guarding of Mid-America and of the Roman Catholic Church is misdirected. And I hasten to add that the Christian Reformed Church has a long and ugly history of drawing the circle and drawing the circle very small — the folks at Mid-America are being true to their heritage! We in the Christian Reformed Church have been moving away from that practice, but the movement is painfully slow, and we still have a long way to go.]

Here is, perhaps, the main point of the conversation and story that connect Jesus and the lawyer. The lawyer's question is about behaviors. It's about boundaries. It's about dividing lines. At issue is this: who will receive life in the coming age, i.e., who will enter the kingdom? Jesus invites the lawyer neither to worry nor to speculate about that question. Instead he invites him to live the life of the coming age now.

“Act this way, and you will be living!” (v. 28). “Go, and act the same way!” (v. 37). Jesus is inviting the lawyer to begin living the life he’s hoping for, because the coming age is dawning right before his eyes, because the kingdom is present in Jesus. That’s the point!

So, what do we take away from this conversation and story? Not that we need in this world more nice people who will help bleeding women in Wichita. Rather we need in this world people who follow after Jesus. We need in this world people who enter the kingdom through Jesus and cling to the hope of the coming age. We need in this world people who seek to give life the shape of things to come, who look past old antagonisms and divisions in order to give and receive both help and hospitality.

Imagine an injured Israeli soldier being helped by a keffiyeh-wearing, AK-47-toting member of Hezbollah! Imagine American citizens seeking justice for legal and illegal immigrants! Imagine African-American churches and white churches finding ways to walk arm-in-arm!

In his Resurrection, Jesus took the first breath of the life of the coming age. Then he breathed that life onto his disciples. Then he sent the Holy Spirit to the church as life-breath from the coming age. Now, when we and others seek to give life that future shape, that’s good news for a wounded world. When we and others seek to give life that future shape, that’s good news for people who are bleeding, whether on the road to Jericho, in a Wichita convenience store, in the Arizona desert, or on the near east side of Columbus.

“Go.” Jesus says. “Act the same way!”