

Laws are funny things. And laws sanctioned by heavenly powers are stranger still. Moses has had no end of difficulty convincing his fellow travellers that God has invited them into a relationship that seems to be governed by human behaviour; starting with a list of things that we shall and shall not do...

Much of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy are concerned with our “expected” behaviour. It’s not enough (apparently) to have said “Thou shalt not kill” - the law must also consider extenuating circumstances and conditions. So as Deuteronomy comes to an end, and the people prepare to move ahead under new leadership, there is one last appeal - not to law and order, but to common sense.

“Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.”

Forget about the complication of “what if” - you know what to do - your heart will tell you what is right.

If only that were so.

Fast forward to the time of Jesus, to a people still trying to live out the law of Moses. It has gotten more difficult. The land of the promise and the people of the promise live under Roman law now, and the struggle to find balance between the law of God and the law of Caesar is part of their daily reality. There are still those who honestly try. People of good intentions, who want to live according to the promise and invitation of God. “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” How can I live in a way that will let me claim the promise and honour the covenant?

When we read Luke's account, we most often imagine (because that's what Luke tells us to imagine) an arrogant man who is looking for excuses. He gives the "right" answer, which Jesus praises, but follows with that sticky question..."and who is my neighbour?"

The author of Luke's gospel claims the man wanted to "justify" himself - that he is looking for an escape clause that would allow him to say "see, it is too hard." His questions focused on himself - his righteousness - his access to the promise of eternity, even though the answer from the law (the right answer - says Jesus) suggest an outward focus - love God and love neighbour. Jesus may well have quoted Deuteronomy 30: verse 11 (with a sarcastic snarl) and sent him on his way - but God is hospitality and compassion, and Jesus is the living embodiment of God, so instead he tells a story of hospitality and compassion.

Richard Swanson, a Lutheran Pastor turned University professor from South Dakota, writes a regular column on the lectionary gospel readings which I particularly enjoy. He is famous for focussing on alternative ways to approach the text, and for this parable in particular, Swanson suggests that we've been too critical of the priest and the levite. We remember them for their inactivity - for their passing by on the other side - But Swanson reminds us that both of these individuals were following a path to righteousness. They were behaving as the law required men of their station to behave. Contact with the dead (surely this man was dead) meant that they could not perform their religious function. Rendered unclean, they would be (temporarily) useless to their community. Swanson's argument makes me think that they had no choice but to pass by. Indeed, that may be the whole point of Jesus story. This parable radically expands the community of care by bringing an outsider - a Samaritan - to the front of the stage in a leading role.

If this parable draws any radical conclusions, one of them might be (according to Swanson) “...it is a darn good thing that there are Samaritans in the world: people of another community, another language, another religion, strangers pictured as enemies.”

For the parable shows us people who are trapped by the expectations of their communities (the Levite and the priest) as two folks in the wrong place at the wrong time. Would the story have been more effective, I wonder, if it had been one or the other lying beaten at the side of the road, then rescued by this generous stranger. I don't think it matters who is wounded - nor does it matter who does the rescuing - the parable points away from the personal and cultural definitions of us/them, and pushes us toward action. It is the act of compassion that makes the difference - the doing is the key to the original questions (What must I do...?)

The lesson here is that something must be done. It doesn't matter by whom - the rescue is no more or less effective if it is offered by the Levite or the priest; the man just needed help. We may well be caught in the same cultural trap; having assigned responsibility for justice in the land to elected officials or law enforcement agencies, we look on in despair as people are gradually diminished by the smallest sort of behaviour - which the law seems powerless to prevent - bullying and bigotry; classifying people according to gender or race; The law looks for particular offence while ignoring the general, and so communities are divided by fear and misinformation. Jesus parable doesn't moralize - instead it invites action of the simplest, most personal kind. If compassion is the definition of neighbourly activity, “go and do likewise.” Don't ask “whose job is it?” If the consequences of kindness don't trouble you, just do it.