

The Calculus of Faith

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Scriptures: Deuteronomy 30:9-14, Luke 10:25-37 ORD 15C

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Deuteronomy 30:9-14

⁹and the LORD your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, ¹⁰when you obey the LORD your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

¹¹Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. ¹²It 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?" ¹³Neither 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?" ¹⁴No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

Luke 10:25-37

25Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 26He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" 27He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." 28And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." 29But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 30Jesus replied, "A man 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. 31Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' 36Which of

these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" 37He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Proclamation of the Word

Jesus is approached as a good teacher. I cannot think of any more important people in my life than those who were my teachers. I am sure you remember specific school teachers and professors who made an impact on your life. I can also remember, Mrs. Lil Kemp my first boss who managed Miss Smith's dress shop and under whom I apprenticed from age 14 until college. More than good business and customer relations, I learned from Lil Kemp by the way she lived her life. Many Saturdays when I worked with her, she was gathering supplies during her lunch hour to teach Sunday School to the children of the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church.

Another teacher I remember fondly is Mr. William Good. He was the only higher level math teacher in a smaller high school where a teacher has to wear many hats. Mr. Good was also one of the few African American teachers at my school. He grew up in segregated schools and attended SC State where he excelled academically as well as on the football field. What I remember most about him is his hands- covered in chalk dust and huge. I think I had Mr. Good for almost every math class including AP Calculus. He had sharp minded, mathematically gifted kids to deal with, and then he had me. My classmates were National Merit Scholars earning full scholarships to the Air Force Academy, Clemson, Georgia Tech. I googled Mr. Good and only found his classroom blog and one site noting where a student excelled and achieved at academic competition and was accepted to the Governor's School for Science and Math. Beside the outstanding student's name was his home high school and the name of the teacher- Mr. Good. A silent, behind the scenes genius who even helped me pass the AP Calculus exam. The way he helped so many excel was through practice, practice, practice. Practice in class, homework, of course, working problems until our fingers hurt. In addition Mr. Good held Math Team practice two afternoons a week for more practice. I went mainly to improve and prepare for the SAT and AP exams. He was tireless. Calculus is the study of change- integers, functions, derivatives.

When anyone would complain about why we needed to know all this stuff and what good it would do any of us, he would respond with the same answer. He was not a man of many words. He would say,

You will need this to build bridges some day.

Jesus is approached by a ruler of the law, a lawyer. He calls Jesus "Teacher".

Jesus is one who taught and demonstrated about the practices of faith. He coached his disciples on how to live and proclaim the Kingdom of God. In fact, they are having a welcome home party for the seventy that have been sent out on a mission trip when a scholar of the faith, a lawyer, steps near to Jesus to test him. Now this kind of test which Jesus had prepared for. He was schooled in Hebrew law and the prophets, but for Jesus faithfulness was never a head game or a philosophical debate. He always taught how to put the faith into action. He was a good teacher like Mr. Good.

Here he is at the welcome home party for the 70 apostles. Here he is with plate of food and punch in hand when the scholar approaches him with his mouth full of hummus dip and olive tapenade. He is like the Physician who gets cornered at his child's soccer game and gets hit up for free medical advice. But Jesus is ready for the question and up for the test. The scholar's question leads Jesus to telling a parable that engages all who hear it.

The presenting problem is "How do I inherit eternal life?" Jesus turns the test on him and retorts, "What does the law say?"

And the Scholar is sharp and quick. He knows the answer for he has studied many hours. He remembers Deuteronomy 6:5

Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the LORD is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might

And from the book of Leviticus- 18 You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

So the lawyer sums up the law in this way- You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

In fact, Jesus has summed up the Law in this same way in his teaching. The scholar of the law knows the right answer. He should have stopped there, but wanting to justify himself, he goes on to ask Jesus who is my neighbor? The scholar wants to know he is in the right...to know that he has followed the law and might inherit eternal life. He is hoping that Jesus will confirm that he has been a righteous Jew- a follower of the greatest commandment.

Don't we all look for loopholes like this? We want confirmation that we have lived a good life, done rightly so we can feel okay about our own faith journey.

But Jesus does nothing to make the man feel secure. He basically shows the man that he has not behaved with extravagant mercy toward all of his neighbors. Perhaps he has been kind and fair to people like himself....people which shared his faith values, his political views, his same socio-economics, but Jesus pushes him and us to ask....have you treated all your neighbors with mercy? Neighbor is more broadly defined. Jesus defines neighbor as the least likely one from whom you would want to accept mercy or help. Samaritans and Jews despised each other.

Who is it that you hold in contempt? Who do you despise?

Amy Jill Levine is an Orthodox Jew who also teaches New Testament at Vanderbilt Divinity School. Some of you, like me, have sat at her feet to learn from this wonderful teacher. She is the author of *The Misunderstood Jew*. AJ Levine reminds us how shocking the parable would be to Jesus' hearers. They too would be surprised that the priest and the Levite do not help. She makes us realize that we have been over familiar with this story and sometimes mistakenly made it about purity and cleanliness laws.

She helps us see that the shock was that the beaten man and the Samaritan were extreme enemies. She writes, "The ancient kingdom of Samaria is today, the West Bank. The man in the ditch is an Israeli Jew; a rabbi and a Jewish member of the Knesset (the Israeli Legislature) would fail to help the wounded man, but a member of Hamas shows him compassion."¹ Not only would the Hamas member bind up the man's wounds with Hydrogen peroxide and Neosporin, he would put him in his own jeep, take him to the nearest hotel, pay for his room, and come back the next day to pay the manager more until he was well enough to go home.

Such is the extent of true mercy. Levine continues, , If that scenario could be imagined by anyone in the Middle East, perhaps there might be more hope for peace."²

Instead of seeing ourselves as the person who saves life, perhaps we should place ourselves in that ditch and wonder, who would be the most unlikely person to help us or from whom we would expect help. On a light note would it be a Clemson fan and a USC fan? Would it be a Republican and a Democrat? Would it be a Muslim and a Christian? A Mexican illegal and a Border Patrol agent? Who are the unlikely ones to offer and receive mercy from each other?

The highway between Jericho and Jerusalem linked unlikely people in commerce, goods and services. It was a great place for robbers and pirates of the road to make away with a purse or some goods which they might keep or sell for profit. It was a dangerous road. Jesus knew that road. He was on a daunting journey much like the busy highway between Jericho and Jerusalem. He had turned his face toward Jerusalem in Luke Chapter 9. He was going there to become the one battered, bruised and beaten for the sake of showing us the Kingdom of God. He would

become the wounded traveler. The road would lead to the cross. And as the prophet Isaiah said, by his wounds we would be healed and made whole.

It is the nature and character of God to behave as the Samaritan did- yes God is like that hated Samaritan...binding up wounds, taking time to tend to the hurting, and to enact mercy. This neighboring God sees to the heart of each person and knows our deepest needs. And the heart of God is one that is full of abundant mercy.

Story: Palestinian family

A couple of years ago there was a story in the news about a twelve-year old Palestinian boy, Ahmed Khatib, who had been shot and killed by Israeli soldiers during street fighting near his house in Jenin, the West Bank. The boy had been holding a toy gun. He was taken to an Israeli hospital, where he died after two days. His parents made the decision to allow his organs to be harvested for transplant to the Israelis. Six people received his heart, lungs and kidneys including a two-month old infant. His mother, Alba, said, "My son has died.

Maybe he can give life to others." ³

In doing so she acted as neighbor, as one who showed mercy, and touched the heart of God and eternity itself.

In the Kingdom of God, it is by practicing mercy as we encounter problems that we learn the calculus of faith. We apply certain principles or laws so that we might learn the fundamentals of faith. Mr. Good was right. Practice, practice, practice was the best way to prepare for that AP exam and the SAT. But Mr. Good was also teaching us a lesson that prepared us for life and building bridges.

It is the fundamental law of mercy that teaches us know how to build bridges.

And in the Kingdom of God, the only equation that really matters is

Loving God = Loving Neighbor

1 Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006) 148-149.

2 IBID.

3 Story as told by James a Wallace, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3*. Bartlett and Brown , editors. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox) p. 241-243.