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Pentecost 7

*But a Samaritan while
traveling came near him;
and when he saw him, he
was moved with pity.*

Contributor:
William L. Dols
bdols@bibleworkbench.org

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• Lectionary Readings (Year C)

Revised Common Lectionary

First Reading	Amos 7:7-17 or Deuteronomy 30:9-14
Second Reading	Colossians 1:1-14
Gospel	<i>Luke 10:25-37</i>
Psalm	82 or 25:1-10

At the Workbench: Pentecost 7; Proper 10

Luke 10:25-37

1 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit
2 eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He
3 answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul,
4 and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And
5 he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

6 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied,
7 "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers,
8 who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a
9 priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.
10 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other
11 side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was
12 moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine
13 on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of
14 him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take
15 care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which
16 of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the
17 robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do
18 likewise."

Exploring the Pattern: Themes and Motifs

1. "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. . .

What do you know about *a man*? What might he look like? How does he walk or shuffle or scurry along? Why do you suppose he is on this lonely and desolate road leading through the Judean wilderness from the temple city of Jerusalem to the ancient village of Jericho by the Dead Sea? What is he leaving? Where is he headed?

How do you imagine his "falling" into the hands of *robbers*? What is happening to him in the *hands* of those who strip and beat him, leaving *him half dead*? What noises do you hear? What does the violence feel like?

Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

What do you know about *a priest* in those days? Going down the same road he may be coming from where? Where might he be headed? *Likewise a Levite*. What do you recall about the role of the Levite in the world of the Jerusalem temple? Both *saw him*. What do you imagine they see? How do you explain why the two religious people pass *by on the other side*? As they do, what might they be thinking? Feeling?

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He 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. The 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.'

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Recall that the Samaritan is an outsider, from Samaria in the north, and was considered heretical. Touching a Samaritan was thought to render an orthodox Jew unclean. The Samaritan who is *traveling* comes *near him*. Where do you suppose the Samaritan has been? Going where? He, too, sees the man. What do you suppose he sees? What moves him *with pity*? What might he be thinking to himself? What is he feeling? What does he do?

2. In the Greek you would notice that the one set upon by robbers is *anthropos* or “a person.” This invites you to wonder if the person may have been a woman or, even, a child.

Who are the people in your world—across the town, country, or planet; desk, checkout counter, or dining room table; in a homeless shelter, city hall, or on Capitol Hill—who are walking a lonely road through their own particular wilderness? Who are the people in your state, neighborhood, school, church, food stamp line, or unemployment office who fall into “the hands of robbers”? Who are “robbers” in your world? Who do they “strip,” “beat,” and leave as “half dead”? What are they robbing or stealing? How do they do that and manage to then disappear?

When you look around and really “see,” who do you perceive left behind as “half dead” on the road you, too, walk?

Who are the “priest” and “Levite” in the story as you observe and live it daily in 2010? How do they “see” in ways that lead them to “pass by on the other side”?

Who are your Samaritans? Where do you find the heretical and unclean outsiders in your world? Who are the ones people like you discount and write off, avoid and try to ignore? Name some of the invisible ones who have no place at your office, school, club, church, day care center, favorite restaurant, car pool, or neighborhood picnic?

Exploring the Pattern: Themes and Motifs

Luke 10:25-37 • July 11, 2010

Name, if you can, Samaritans you know, hear about, watch on TV news, or read about in the newspapers who “see” the wounded one, come near him/her, and are moved by “pity” to do something to care.

3. How do the figures in this story—the person on the wilderness road, the robbers, the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan—dwell within you? What do you know of this same drama happening daily on the stage that is you?

What do you know of a part of yourself who has been beaten, stripped, and left half-dead along a wilderness road in your life? How have you personally experienced such robbery and wounding? How might it have happened years ago in childhood, during your teens, as your career, tour, marriage, or journey progressed? Who are some of the robbers you have met along the road? And what do you know of robbers within yourself who have and, perhaps, continue to wound and cripple you, leaving you only half alive? How do you continue to beat on yourself and steal possibilities?

Who are those who, “seeing” you, crossed to the other side of the road leaving you there on the road hurt and bleeding? Name one or more of the “priests” or “Levites” who passed you by. How might they have been part of a “Jerusalem temple”? How were they people concerned about purity and righteousness, keeping rules, and guarding boundaries? And your own personal “priests” and “Levites”—aspects of yourself—who passed by and, perhaps even today, turn away from your wounded self? How, perhaps, does the best part of you turn away from your hurts and bruises?

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And what of a Samaritan along the way who saw something different than all the others? Someone who owed you nothing, on the best of days got little of your attention or interest, who when given the choice you chose to avoid, not to sit next to on the bus, or at the next table in Starbucks? What do you know of such an outsider or alien in your world who once had "pity" on you and "went to you," "bandaged your wounds," and took "care" of you? And your inner Samaritan? What do you know of an alienated, foreign, strange, kinky or quirky, uncomfortable, and unacceptable part of you who may be the welcoming, caring, and healing one who awaits you?

4. Look around the class, pews, bus, or the faces along the street for one on the lonely wilderness road who is being robbed, stripped, beaten, is half dead and of no interest to priests and Levites. Where do you sense a Samaritan? What if this unlikely person might be the one with pity, bandages, oil, wine, and caring?

Look in the mirror. Look hard and see the you who knows of a lonely wilderness road, robbers, living half dead, being passed by and ignored by the ones you had reason to count on, yet were cared about by the one you least expected. How have you known this story on your journey? How is it still going on within you?

Reading Between the Lines

When Bill Dols described the priest as going down “the same road,” the phrase arrested my attention. I believe all the characters in this story are alive (even if lurking rather silently in the shadows) in my mind, heart, and soul. That leads me to wonder: How many times have those characters managed to point me down the same dangerous and self-destructive road? What did it finally take for me to realize that something I do, feel, or understand must change? Did I do what was necessary to make the change? If not, why not? “An Autobiography In Five Short Chapters” by Portia Nelson (from *There’s a Hole in My Sidewalk*, Hillsboro, OR: Beyond Words Publishing, 1993, pp. 2-3) describes “pitfalls” I have experienced going down the same road and the change process that led to healing:

Chapter One

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost. . . . I am helpless.
It isn’t my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

Chapter Two

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don’t see it.
I fall in again.
I can’t believe I am in this same place.
But it isn’t my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

Chapter Three

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in. . . it’s a habit. . . but,
my eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.

Chapter Four

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

Chapter Five

I walk down another street.

Caren Goldman
cgoldman@bibleworkbench.org

When we say the Lord’s Prayer, it bothers me that the people I pray with seem to come to a complete stop after “thy will be done.” I suspect that Jesus meant us to say, “Thy will be done ON EARTH as it is in heaven,” without a break. One reason I feel this way is that I have read this story of the Samaritan and the beaten up, robbed, and naked Jew. I’ve come to love this story (after a slow start) as a tiny glimpse of what our lives might be like if God’s kingdom were to come on earth, if God’s will were done on earth, as it is in heaven.

What heavy, scary responsibilities and demands would be laid on me if I were to live in God’s kingdom right here on my piece of earth as I would in the ideal of heaven! Oh, the changes in my use of time and energy, money and concerns if I were to be the Samaritan who does God’s will on earth as in heaven! Could I bear these changes? As the beat-up Jew, however, I feel right now the loving care of family, friends, and colleagues who respond to my needs and take care of them—just as if we were all in heaven. (I’ll wait and think about those priests and Levites another day.)

Caroline Wilfong
cpwohlforth@bibleworkbench.org

Reading Between the Lines

Jericho Road

I crawl into bed half-dead
and bury my face into the pillow,
pulling the quilt up over my
blood-shot eyes.

More than tired—
I am hiding from all that I have
left undone. Hiding from the
shame of my mercilessness,
of having crossed too often
to the other side of the road.

Yet even here—
maybe especially here—
I have failed at kindness.

For a wide road runs the
length of our bed.
And I keep to the safety
of the shoulder,
while you lie on the far
side needing what I don't
believe I have to give.

I sigh as if exhaling
my final breath
and feel your hand caress
my head, sweeping my hair
from the back of my neck—
just that—
a healing balm.

You have crossed the road
to me again, poured oil and
wine,
and bandaged up my
wounds.

Nearest neighbor,
dearest kin, you have
opened your heart once more
and taken me in.

Kathie Collins

kcollins@bibleworkbench.org

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He 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. . .

If you are leading a *BWB* group, prepare for your session by having a small bowl of olive oil, and a small cup of wine in the middle of your table. Make sure there is enough space in your room to *travel*.

What is *oil*? What is it made from, and how is it made? What is *wine*? What is it made from, and how is it made? Why might one who was traveling carry *oil* and *wine*? Why might a Samaritan, in particular, be carrying oil and wine?

Ask your group members to face away from each other. Ask them to *travel, alone, from Jerusalem to Jericho*. Read just the story itself, slowly, (beginning with "A man was going down . . .", and ending with ". . . whatever more you spend.")

Re-read the story again, slowly, asking them to express being the Samaritan, perhaps using the wine and the oil to *bandage his wounds*.

Consider what you might now know about this story.

Beth Harrison

bharrison@bibleworkbench.org

Parallel Readings

From *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*

We want the truth attenuated, softened, bathed, and powdered. . . . Sheldon's point [in *In His Steps*] was that Jesus is most likely to be found in the worst slums, among the most dispossessed people, on the most dangerous streets in a modern city. My own proposal for the cover of my postmodern edition of *In His Steps* is to use a scene from the HBO series *The Wire*. The best contemporary counterpart to the "Rectangle"—Sheldon's idea of the people Jesus had in mind when he announced his mission, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18)—is the drug scene in the inner-city ghettos like those in Baltimore, whose grim violence is unforgettably etched in our mind by the stunning cinematography of *The Wire*. In the midst of the mindlessness of much commercial television, there are artists willing to speak the truth, in this case, to honestly portray what I consider the very world that Jesus said constituted his mission. *The Wire* is as complicated to follow as a Russian novel—which reflects the complexity of moral life itself—and, like Dostoyevsky, is as high minded and as tragic about the drama of good and evil. If you want to see what Sheldon's Jesus would do, to see someone Christlike translated into the terms of the twenty-first century, someone walking in the steps of Jesus, then study the people who are trying to intervene in that world. Someone like "Prez," the teacher, gentle as a lamb in the midst of wolves, who spends himself on behalf of the children in his class. Prez's work is blocked not only by the merciless poverty and violence of the world in which his students live but also by academic programs devised by demagogues, which compel teachers to stop teaching and "teach the test," to stop addressing the singular needs of children in singular situations and teach a standardized test. Or "McNulty" and "Bunny Colvin," policemen as self-conflicted as St. Paul, who understand perfectly that the powers that be, the "(City)Hall," are people who are interested not in alleviating misery and reducing crime on the street but in accumulating favorable but meaningless statistics that will ensure their reelection. Or the children on the street, like "Dee" or "Randy," who tried in vain to lift themselves out of a world saturated with crime. *The Wire* is a postmodern parable set not in the olive groves of ancient Galilee but in the streets of the contemporary inner city. There everything Jesus meant by the kingdom, and everything Paul meant by grace and the new being, fights a losing battle with the powers of this world

John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?: The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church*, (Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2007), pp 28-29. Reprinted with permission.

and with the whitened sepulchers whose fathers killed the prophets.

The Wire gives us an idea of how a deconstruction works. It simply tells the truth, meticulously, uncompromisingly, without disguise, amelioration, or artificial sweeteners. In a deconstruction, things are made to tremble by their own inner impulse, by a force that will give them no rest, that keeps forcing itself to the surface, forcing itself out, making things restless. Deconstruction is organized around the idea that things contain a kind of uncontainable truth, that they contain what they cannot contain. Nobody has to come along and “deconstruct” things. Things are auto-deconstructed by the tendencies of their own inner truth. In a deconstruction, the “other” is the one who tells the truth on the “same”; the other is the truth of the same, the truth that has been repressed and suppressed, omitted and marginalized, or sometimes just plain murdered, like Jesus himself, which is why Johannes Baptist Metz speaks of the “dangerous memory” of the suffering of Jesus, and why I describe deconstruction as a hermeneutics of the kingdom of God.

The truth is not the stuff of edifying hymns, rather it is dangerous, dirty, and smelly business.

The “danger” Metz describes is the deconstructed force. As soon as the “other” tells the truth, as soon as the truth is out, then the beliefs or the practices, the texts or institutions, that have been entrusted with that truth begin to tremble! Then they have to reconfigure, reorganize, regroup, reassemble in order to come to grips with their inner tendencies—or repress them all the more mightily. So Sheldon is effectively proposing a “deconstruction of the church,” a deconstruction of what calls itself Christianity, “a challenge to Christianity as it is practiced in our churches” (*In His Steps*, 14). The assembly (*ecclesia*) of the First Church of Raymond, Kansas, is called to *re-assemble*, to regroup, called to a new order, by a shocking Christlike street person who comes bearing the truth. If the truth can make us free, as we all so readily agree, it cannot do so without deconstruction, which is a way of making, or letting, the truth happen. The truth is not the stuff of edifying hymns, rather it is dangerous, dirty, and smelly business. To seek the truth is to play with fire and a way to get burned. Not everyone has a stomach for it, above all those who say “Lord, Lord” and head for cover the minute the Lord shows up dressed in rags and smelling like a street person. Be careful what you pray for: Lord, give me the truth—but not yet! The next time we look up to heaven and piously pray “Come, Lord Jesus,” we may find that he is already here, trying to get warm over an urban steam grate or trying to cross our borders.

On my reading, which will sound a little too pious to impious deconstructors and downright impious to good and pious Christians, deconstruction is a theory of *truth*, in which truth spells *trouble*. As does Jesus. That is what they have in common. The truth will make you free, but it does so by turning your life upside down.

John D. Caputo

From Cottonwood County*My Love For All Things Warm and Breathing*

I have seldom loved more than one thing at a time, yet this morning I feel myself expanding, each part of me soft and glandular, and under my skin is room enough now for the loving of many things, and all of them at once, these students especially, not only the girl in the yellow sweater, whose name, Laura Buxton, is somehow the girl herself, Laura for the coy green mellowing eyes, Buxton for all the rest, but also the simple girl in blue on the back row, her mouth sad beyond all reasonable inducements, and the boy with the weight problem, his teeth at work even now on his lower lip, and the grand profusion of hair and nails and hands and legs and tongues and thighs and fingertips and wrists and throats, yes, of throats especially, throats through which passes the breath that joins the air that enters through these ancient windows, that exits, that takes with it my own breath, inside this room just now my love for all things warm and breathing, that lifts it high to scatter it fine and enormous into the trees and the grass, into the heat beneath the earth beneath the stone, into the boundless lust of all things bound but gathering.

William Kloefkorn

From Newsweek*Why God Hates Haiti*

Haiti is surely a Job among nations. It is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere: half its population lives on less than a dollar a day. With 98 percent of its forests felled and burned for firewood, Haiti is uniquely vulnerable to flooding from hurricanes. In 2008 four storms in as many weeks left a million homeless. Haiti has an infant-mortality rate worse than that of many African nations, and its people are plagued by disease: diarrhea, hepatitis, typhoid fever, dengue fever, malaria, and leptospirosis are rampant there. This litany doesn't even touch on Haiti's disastrous political history, most notably the reign of François (Papa Doc) Duvalier, who assassinated and tortured more than 30,000 in the 1960s.

Now, with as many as 100,000 dead in last week's earthquake, a sensible person of faith has to grapple with the problem of what scholars call theodicy. If God is good and intervenes in the world, then why does he make innocents suffer? Why, as

"My Love For All Things Warm and Breathing" by William Kloefkorn, from *Cottonwood County: Poems by William Kloefkorn and Ted Kooser*, (Orange County, CA: Windflower Press, 1979).

Lisa Miller, "Why God Hates Haiti: The frustrating theology of suffering" in *Newsweek*, Jan 15, 2010, p. 14.

In the face of unjust and inexplicable suffering, then, the responsibility of the faithful is to remain faithful—and to help relieve suffering.

Job might have said, would God “crush an impoverished people with a tempest and multiply their wounds without cause? He will not let them get their breath.”

For Pat Robertson, the TV evangelist, the answer is simple: it's the Haitians' own fault, presumably for practicing voodoo. On the Christian Broadcasting Network last week, Robertson alluded to events leading up to the Haitian Revolution of 1791, history's rare successful slave revolt. On the eve of the revolt, insurgents gathered in a forest called the Bois Caiman to swear a blood oath. “The wind was wailing,” reads a passage from *Revolutionary Freedoms*, a history of the Haitian people. “Heavy drops of rain were falling from a dark and cloudy sky on the ragged leaves of the trees, on the group of men dancing slowly to the sounds of Vodou drum beats.” Haitians cherish the story of the Bois Caiman as part of their liberation. Today, nearly all Haitians are Christian; about half also practice voodoo, an adaptation of their African ancestors' native religion.

In his narrow, malicious way, Robertson is making a First Commandment argument: when the God of Israel thunders from his mountaintop that “you shall have no other gods before me,” he means it. This God rains down disaster—floods and so forth—on those who disobey.

But Robertson's is a fundamentalist view. It's so unkind and self-righteous—and deaf, dumb, and blind to centuries of theological discourse on suffering by thinkers from Augustine to Elie Wiesel—that one might easily call it backward. Every Western religious tradition teaches that mortals have no way of counting or weighing another's sin. “If that happened to the Haitians because they're so sinful, then why hasn't it happened to him?” retorts Bart Ehrman, a Bible scholar at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

“I think,” adds Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, “that it's supreme hubris to think you can read God's mind.”

Over the next weeks, sensible clerics will struggle with what to say. “The really smart ones,” says Ehrman, “will be saying that God is mysterious and we can't explain everything.” Others will teach that the earthquake is the work of the Devil or that believers can find blessings in the calamity, for in heaven the dead will finally find tranquillity and repose. As a Roman Catholic blogger wrote last week, “This world is not all there is.”

Rabbi Kushner teaches that natural disasters are somehow outside the purview of a loving God. In the face of unjust and inexplicable suffering, then, the responsibility of the faithful is to remain faithful—and to help relieve suffering. “The will of God,” says Kushner, “is not to send us the disaster, but to send us the disaster to overcome.” This, incidentally, is where the majority of scholars end up on Job. “There is a resolution to be found in the depth of a pious life lived before a mysterious God,” reads the commentary in the New Oxford Annotated Bible.

Theodicy remains the most powerful tool in the atheist's kit, however, and many a believer has turned away from God over the suffering of innocents. Ehrman did. After a lifetime as a Christian, "I just got to a point where I couldn't explain how something like this could happen, if there's a powerful and loving God in charge of the world. It's a very old problem, and there are a lot of answers, but I don't think any of them work." Even so, we will continue to do tzedakah—and to pray.

Lisa Miller

Critical Background

From *Re-Imagine the World*

Jerusalem to Jericho

This is the only parable that takes place in a specific place, on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. Most parables are set in a general situation, a field, a house, etc. Also the characters in this parable are specified with greater detail than normal, a priest, a Levite and a Samaritan. Such specification clearly underlines the parable's Jewishness.

Jerusalem is in the hill country (2,700 feet above sea level), while Jericho is on a plain (820 feet below sea level). Jericho as described by Josephus is a beautiful country, well irrigated and lush, called the "City of a Thousand Palms." But the surrounding area is desert. King Herod had a winter palace there and many priests had their homes in Jericho.

The trip down from Jerusalem to Jericho passes through a deserted area, where there are many caves in which to hide. The road was notorious for bandits and one of the unusual aspects of this parable is all the people traveling alone on this road. Normally, folks traveled this route in caravans for protection.

The man falls among robbers who strip him, beat him and leave him half dead. Each of these items calls for comment. In the context of Jesus' story telling we should assume the man is a Jew, otherwise there should be some specific marker of his identity. If he is stripped, the audience will have no notion of his social class, something clearly marked off by clothing in the ancient world. By being stripped, he truly becomes anonymous.

Left half-dead has provoked a wide range of discussion among commentators. Does this term mean that the man could pass for dead, looks as if he is dead; or that he is near death, clearly in need of help or he will die. The evidence for its meaning is not perfectly clear, so we will work out the possibilities for both cases. . . .

Given the man's situation, abandoned dying in the ditch, the hearer is clued in as to the story's type. We await the arrival of the hero with whom we can identify.

Bernard Brandon Scott,
Re-Imagine the World, (Santa
Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press,
2001), pp. 58-63.

Priest and Levite

First down the road comes a priest, who sees him and passes by. The story describes his action in two verbs. He sees the

man in the ditch. It's not just a glance. The Greek verb describing his action after he sees the man is made up of two prepositions and a verb—literally in English, he passes beside and over and against. The “over and against” is a storyteller's gesture of pushing away.

What was the priest's obligation? Was he required to stop or was he justified in passing on? To some degree it depends upon how we understand “half-dead.” If the priest thinks he is dealing with a corpse, he might calculate that he must avoid it, for otherwise he would suffer impurity. According [to] the command in Leviticus, a priest is not allowed to touch a corpse. But in the *Mishnah* and *Talmud* there are extended discussions on this verse, making finer and finer gradations all to the point that if the corpse is abandoned, that takes precedence over the Leviticus rule. Taking care of an abandoned corpse takes precedence even over studying the Torah. But then again, all these fine distinctions stem from learned discussions of the rabbis, so a priest, who follows the strict construction of the Torah, might set them aside as just liberal reductions of the Torah's true meaning. If on the other hand, “half-dead” means that the man is close to the death, then the priest's duty is clear. He must come to the man's aid.

Taking care of an abandoned corpse takes precedence even over studying the Torah.

Perhaps the priest has other very legitimate concerns. Maybe the man in the ditch is only a decoy for robbers who will attack him when he stops to help. So he prudently rushes on past the man in the ditch.

In the end, all these speculations are useless. The storyteller provides no reason for the priest's action. He just acts that way. Perhaps the storyteller shares the common anti-clericalism of the day. This is just the way priests are. At any rate, the storyteller is uninterested in the priest's motives and simply describes his actions.

This same scenario is repeated in the case of the Levite. The Levite and the priest belong to the same tribe of Levi, but the priests are the descendants of Aaron. Since Levites were employed in regular temple service, we could rehearse the same set of excuses, but the storyteller is uninterested. These two members of the religious elite simply pass on by on the other side.

Samaritan

A first century Jewish audience now knows what is going to happen next in this hero story. The third character will be one of them, an Israelite, meaning a Jewish layperson. The expected triad is priest, Levite and Israelite. As the great Jewish scholar Claude Montefiore once remarked, the triad in this parable “is no less queer and impossible than ‘Priest, Deacon and Frenchman’ would be to us today” (vol.2, p. 467). The expected English triad would be priest, deacon and layman. The ancient

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world was extremely hierarchical and these hierarchies were well known to all. The *Mishnah* provides a good example of hierarchical arrangement and the expected triad.

Triad

A priest takes precedence over a Levite, a Levite over an Israelite, and Israelite over a *mamzer* (bastard), a *mamzer* over a *Netin* (temple slave), a *Netin* over a proselyte, a proselyte over a freed slave.”

Mishnah HORAYOT, 3:9 (Neusner)

But instead of the expected Israelite, the hated Samaritan makes an appearance. The origin of the animosity between Jews and Samaritans is probably lost in the dark shadows of history, but by the time of Jesus, the hostility was well established. It appears to involve a division about where to worship (Jerusalem for Jews, and Mount Gerizim for the Samaritans) and two different versions of the Pentateuch. The Samaritans claimed the the Jewish Torah had been redacted so as to eliminate the true worship on Mount Gerizim, while of course Jews claimed the opposite. About 500 Samaritans continue to live near the West Bank town of Nablus, which is in the shadow of Mount Gerizim. For Jews at Jesus’ time the Samaritans were foreigners (see Luke 17:18).

A comparison of the description of the three characters who approach the man in the ditch indicates both similarities and differences. The table is a literal translation of Greek representing its word order and phonetic similarities.

By chance a certain priest	was going down on that road	and upon seeing him <i>passed-by-on-the-other-side</i>
Likewise also a Levite	upon at that place <i>coming</i>	and upon seeing <i>passed-by-on-the-other-side</i>
But a certain Samaritan	while on the road <i>came</i> upon him	and upon seeing had compassion

The priest and the Levite are clearly viewed in parallel, with the accent on the final verb “passed-by-on-the-other-side.” The second column indicates how the description of the Samaritan’s approach is made up of words from the descriptions [of] both the priest and Levite: “road” and “coming.” This similarity would lead an audience to expect the Samaritan would behave just the same as the priest and Levite. When the Samaritan “came upon him” the Greek may imply that the man’s approach entailed a threat. In the third column the final action is initiated in exactly the same way, “and upon seeing.” This stresses the seeing of the half-dead man in the ditch. It also reinforces the audience’s expectation that the Samaritan will behave in at least a similar fashion, if not worse.

Thus the audience is totally unprepared for the final action. The Samaritan had compassion, took pity on him. The Greek for compassion here refers to the entrails, which for the ancients was the seat of emotions, somewhat like the English “the heart.” Perhaps it would be better to translate the phrase, “his heart was moved.”

Even though technically only half the story has been told, it is for all practical purposes over. The Samaritan’s compassion ends the story. There will be no Israelite coming down the road to rescue the half-dead man. This is the only narrative parable in which the punch line occurs in the middle and not the end. Why? I would suggest the continuation of the story allows a hearer time to adjust to the story.

The Samaritan cares for the man's wounds with oil and wine, bandages him up and takes him to an inn. He tells the innkeeper to take care of the man and promises on his return to pay him whatever more is needed.

Identification with the characters is an important element in a story. When the man is attacked and left in the ditch for half-dead, an audience recognizes this as a hero story and awaits arrival of the hero, with whom they will identify. In a very real sense, they will ride to the rescue of the man in the ditch. When the Samaritan first approaches, this plan remains in force and is even reinforced by the similarity of his description to those of the priest and Levite, failed heroes. But when he has compassion, this plan is thrown into a cocked hat. A hearer has three options.

"In real life this would never happen. It's only a story, fiction."

Such a person has forfeited the parable's opportunity of envisioning life anew. Such people remain in the same old world in which they have always dwelt. This is almost always the response of the literal minded, who refuse the option of imagination.

A second option is to identify with the Samaritan.

For a hearer who wants to remain in the hero's role, that is the only alternative. For some few in Jesus' audience this may have been an option. But such people are already different and do not live by the normal values of the Palestinian world of the first century.

Finally, a hearer can identify with the man in the ditch.

If we want to stay in the parable and experience a new world, that is our only available choice. Having begun the parable in expectation of playing the role of the hero, one ends in the role of the victim, being taken care of by one's mortal and moral enemy. The parable announces that the savior is a Samaritan—the hated one.

We should be careful not to underestimate the difficulty of this final option. I would assume that most people in Jesus' audience opted for number one: it's only a story; in reality it would never have happened.

It's always a question how much one should play with a story, how much imagination is licensed by the story, but surely this one suggests we at least experiment with it. As one begins to play with the story, it appears strange that no one asks the man in the ditch whether he wants the Samaritan to take care of him. He might well want to take his chances, and wait for an Israelite. Surely there must be one coming down this road, since one of everything else has.

What if the Samaritan betrays him? What if he turns on him and kills him or sells him into slavery? After all he is a Samaritan. And what about the inn? Inns in the ancient world were not Holiday Inns. Inns and innkeepers had very dubious reputations.

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The Samaritan says that he will return, at least to pay the innkeeper whatever is owed for the man's upkeep. Does this imply that the Samaritan expects to visit the man? How is the man to explain these events to his family and neighbors? Will he be forced to introduce the Samaritan to his family?

Well, maybe we have gone too far, but it does make evident that the man has problems. He surely would prefer an Israelite. There would be less to explain.

Bernard Brandon Scott