

Not Missing the Message in the Good Samaritan Parable

Colleagues,

[Preliminary note. Unrelated to this topic—well maybe not—is this item about Fred Danker of BDAG fame, known to many of you. Next Monday, July 12, 2010, is Fred's 90th birthday. Send him a greeting. Snailmail: 3438 Russell Blvd. #203, St. Louis MO 63104.]

This coming Sunday's Gospel reading is often (mis)understood by readers—and then on Sundays (mis)proclaimed by preachers. The “(mis)” inserts in that sentence are also my own confession from days gone by when I was the preacher and that was text. More than once I've missed the message. Chris Repp informs me that he's found one of Luther's sermons on this text wherein the reformer comments on missing the message, and then proclaims to his congregation (in 15 printed pages!) what the genuine message is. To read it for yourself GO to <http://www.orlutheran.com/html/mlselk10.html>

Here's my short version (a mere 2 pages) of what Luther was talking about.

We miss the message in this text when we presume that Jesus, contrary to his usual habits, did indeed answer the lawyer's question, and tell him who his neighbor was. And that answer then would be: Neighbor is anyone in need who happens to show up on your path. To be sure, Jesus takes the “scenic route” of a parable to answer that question. Yet his parable intends to answer the lawyer's “who is my neighbor” question. Luther said: Not so.

That would indeed be strange coming from Jesus. For when did Jesus ever give a straight answer to the questions his challengers put to him? Instead of getting entangled in THEIR agenda, he always entangled them in HIS agenda. So we should not be expecting Jesus to give a straight answer to the “neighbor-question” from this challenger either.

Instead, with this parable Jesus is addressing HIS agenda, implicit, but mis-focused, in the lawyer’s first question: “How do I get the life that lasts?” In doing so he entangles the lawyer with another question: “What does the Torah say?” Here the lawyer has competence. Well maybe not, since he answers with the Torah’s Mosaic law and not with the Torah’s Abrahamic promise. Not smart. And that leads to the jugular. With Moses in focus he seeks to justify himself. Imagine that! Standing before THE justifier sent by God—aka THE Good Samaritan—he’s going to go it alone. What chutzpah! But now Jesus has enwebbed him and with the questioner in the palm of his hand, Jesus proceeds parabolically, taking him down a different path than he wanted to go. It finally concludes with “Gotcha!”

By this time in Luke’s Gospel we ourselves should have caught on that the “life that lasts” is connection with Jesus and not greater clarity about “what is written in the law.” That’s what Jesus is addressing, not only here but throughout Luke’s entire Gospel. And learning just who the neighbor is in order to fulfill God’s commandments is, as folks say today, “not helpful” for getting to the life that lasts. Au contraire. You wind up in a ditch.

The main characters in the parable are the lawyer and Jesus. The “gotcha!” at the end is that the lawyer is the victim, already half-dead in the ditch, and standing before him at this very moment is THE Good Samaritan. Better said, HIS Good Samaritan. Now the question is addressed to him: “What is your heart

hanging onto for 'dear life'?' Will you switch, or stay in the ditch?"

In the Crossings paradigm it might go something like this:

BAD NEWS–Nomikos

1. Luke designates him right at the git-go with the Greek term "nomikos" (from "nomos," law). That means more than simply lawyer, an expert in God's law. And nomikos signals that right off the bat. He's seeking to obtain the life that lasts (=God's own) by doing something, finally, as Luke tells us, to "justify himself." Nomikos is a legalist. "Do" in order to "get" so that you wind up justified. Which is indeed the way life proceeds in the old creation. Not bad per se. But bad news – dumb, dumb, dumb – when you're seeking the life that lasts, the new creation.
2. "Testing" instead of trusting Jesus [who, at the outset in this narrative, IS the "hidden" de facto Good Samaritan] in the process and trusting that law instead. The Jesus standing before him, talking with him, is not only the nomikos' Good Samaritan, but both the God and the Neighbor his law tells him to love. But the nomikos does NOT love this Jesus, "tests" him instead, thus blowing both of the 2 big commandments in one fell swoop. So by his own law-commitment, he's blown it. (But that's the stuff for the next step.)
3. The nomikos is himself already half-dead in the ditch, deserted by the law as agency for life that lasts, which the parable will reveal as it unfolds. The parable is about his own life, not about someone else, some fictitious other person. The law's agents–priest/levite–are unable (unwilling?) to help him. They may not be passing him by because they are

heartless. They are unable to help. He is helpless with his nomikos life, and the nomos cannot help him at all. The law is incapable of “neighboring” (v.36) him. Even worse, the law itself turns out to be the robber who by the trickery of teasing him to seek life by its agency, finally turns upon him and rends him, robbing him of the life he has and offering nothing for his healing. Half-dead now, he’ll be a complete goner by sunrise.

GOOD NEWS The Good Samaritan the Nomikos Needs

4. The Jesus talking to him IS the Good Samaritan par excellence, meeting him in his already half-dead-in-the-ditch nomikos existence. All the Good Sam predicates in the text are Jesus-predicates: Moved with pity. Chesedh stuff, not nomos stuff. When Good Sam is seen as Jesus himself, all of v. 34 sparkles anew: “pouring out of wine and oil, etc.” are the metaphors for what Jesus is up to in Luke. [Remember he’s “going up to Jerusalem” already.] V. 35 also sparkles anew when you predicate it to Jesus (you can fill in the blanks).
5. The parable’s concluding “go and do likewise” needs to be understood in terms of the switcheroo that Jesus does with the “neighbor” word. Not “who is the neighbor to be loved” in this parable, but who “neighbored” whom? Who was/is THE already-operating “Neighbor-lover” in the story? Good Sam turns out to be the loving neighbor, who rescues the half-dead. He is the neighbor that the nomikos needs to “love,” first of all by receiving his medications. “Go and do likewise” = let this GS do his mercy/wine/oil/donkey/inn and then “promise for continuing care” for you. In other words: trust this GS standing right in front of you. That’s “Go and do likewise,” part One. But there’s a “Go and do likewise,” part two.

6. Part two of “Go and do Likewise” is: Be a “little” Good Samaritan for all the folks you find half-dead in their own nomikos-ditches, and pour on them not your own wine/oil, but the wine/oil of the ONE whose Good-Friday pharmacy and post-Easter “long-term clinical after-care” bestows the life that lasts. Don’t fail to notice his promise to keep on “paying” to preserve it.

The entire parable is about the topic in the nomikos’ mis-focused original question: “doing in order to get the life that lasts.” That’s soteriology. The parable is not about ethics, about being a do-gooder. It’s about salvation, the same agenda we had in the July 4 gospel last Sunday.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder.

P.S. In the church’s ancient lectionary the pericope started two verses earlier (as Lk 10:23-37). It was the Gospel appointed for Trinity 13. It came around every year in the summertime. Those two verses may have been excised by modern lectionary scholars, hinting perhaps that they want to make a moral tale out of Luke’s intended soteriological text. If so, I think that’s a mistake.

There are a total of four “Jesus verses”—vv 21-24—between the Mission of the 70 text (last Sunday’s Gospel) and the G.S. pericope. These four verses are the soteriological glue holding the two pericopes together. Not in vain does Luke tell us “Just then”—i.e., right after these four “Jesus” verses— the nomikos shows up to “test” Jesus. It is NOT really about getting clearer specs on the love-neighbor commandment. It’s about this poor nomikos now standing before THE Good Samaritan. It’s about getting connected to this G.S. when you are lethally disconnected by virtue of being hooked, as the nomikos self-

confessedly is, on a dead-end alternative for getting the life that lasts.

The Mary/Martha pericope immediately following the G.S. text confirms what Luke intends to be the golden thread through this whole chapter: "If you haven't caught on yet what's going on in this chapter 10," Luke is telling his readers, "it's all about 'listening to what HE was saying,' i.e., stuff 'which will not be taken away' from anyone so listening, 'the one (and only) thing needed' to get you out of YOUR ditch when your personal brand of nomological robbers leave you there half-dead."

So it seems to me.