

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

THE ONE WHO SHOWED MERCY

Luke 10:25-37

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Analysis by Ron Starenko

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 robbers?" 37He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

DIAGNOSIS: The Victimized

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *The Identified Victim*

There's more than one victim in this story, as we take a closer look not only to the principal players but also to the whole cast, including the storyteller and the hearers-namely, all the rest of us. To begin with, the fellow who "fell into the hands of robbers" (v. 30), left half-dead, is an obvious victim, but, as we shall see, the lawyer is in worse shape. He seems to have no idea that the story was told to lead him to seek mercy. He fails to see himself in the wounded and stripped victim, even as he missed identifying himself with the indifference and the revulsion experienced by the priest and Levite. He isn't alone. We can remain just as aloof from the fray, too. We resist being drawn into the text; we fail to identify with the lawyer and don't know it. We are people who like to feel good about ourselves, something that can become more important to us than knowing or showing mercy.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *The Deluded Victim*

The lawyer, not needing mercy, wants to vindicate himself, seeking refuge in his knowledge of the law, deluding himself about his goodness. The deluded are always the most heavily defended persons, and paradoxically, the most vulnerable. There are other lawyer-types whom Jesus encounters in the gospels, in particular the self-righteous players in Jesus' parables (cf. Matt. 19:16ff; Luke 15:11-32; 16:19-31; and 18:9-14), all of whom attempt to hide behind a legal and moral facade, imagining that they are safe. We, too, join that crowd whenever we throw all of our energy into anything at all that requires us to serve ourselves, as we distance ourselves from mercy. The deluded

victims whom we become-who believe we have no need for mercy-we invite disaster.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *The Condemned Victim*

Let's face it: our cover blown, we are all victims, and unspeakable judgment awaits us. The author of the letter to the Hebrews put it this way, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31). The lawyer in us has no defense. We are condemned by the very law we hold as the highest of all, "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" (v. 27). Failing that impossible demand, we become victims of God. "The fearful prospect of judgment," described in the Hebrews letter, falls on all who have "violated the law of Moses (as dying) without mercy," and extends also to those who "have spurned the Son of God" (Heb 10:27-29). Could anything be scarier than that? We are a world of victims, the half-dead and the already dead, undeserving of mercy.

PROGNOSIS: The Vindicated

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *The Designated Victim*

Enter the Good Samaritan. There would be no exit were it not for the "one who showed mercy" (v. 37), who became the victim for all victims. Samaritans were already victims of an exclusive society, treated as outcasts and judged as inferior, un-chosen, deserving of being passed by. Yet, the Samaritan is the one who comes to the rescue. Who would deal with victims, even victimizers, and become one with them by a costly grace and vindicate us all, other than our Lord Jesus Christ, who was, as one of our hymns puts it, "Christ the victim, Christ the priest?" This is the issue in the letter to the Hebrews, where the author describes Jesus' priesthood as God's merciful

offering once and for all victims, Jesus the true priest designated by God, who executes the new covenant by being executed himself (cf. Heb. 7:27; 9:13-14; and 10:11-14). In Jesus, the mercy of God overrules God's own law that is against us. And that mercy heals a doomed world.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *The Vindicated Victims*

Nowhere else can poor lawyers and other helpless victims find life, except when they flee to the mercy embodied in Jesus. No longer deluded by our pursuit of some kind of imagined perfection, we have received a mercy worth trusting that transforms us with the water and oil and wine of the Spirit's grace. By our faith we get to be vindicated victims by a promised mercy that unites us with the faithful Victim, our Good Samaritan, Jesus, the Christ, who keeps us in his grace forever.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *The Priests of Mercy*

And all of this finally comes down to being a merciful neighbor, "priests serving our God" (Rev. 5:10) in the image of the exalted "Lamb that was slaughtered" (5:12). The Good Samaritan does not stop to ask who his neighbor is, he simply stoops in mercy to heal the victims of this world and bids us to "go and do likewise" (v. 37). We are empowered by the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ to use our vindication as a gift to victims, like ourselves, whom we encounter in our daily lives, by being priests of the "one who showed mercy." It takes the One to know one and to be one.