

Some 2000 years of deep thinking have been put into discerning the meaning of Jesus' words. Some of that deep thinking has been helpful. Some has not. The story of the Good Samaritan is a prime example.

Jesus says a traveler walking on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho.. If you have been in that part of the world you'll know what a tough road that is. Jerusalem sits at a high elevation. 3,000 ' above sea level. The road down to Jericho drops about 4000 feet. You run into the Dead Sea. Jericho is about 1000 feet below sea level. It takes eight hours to make this challenging journey by foot.

Along this road the traveler is assaulted by some robbers and is left for dead. All his possessions are stolen from him.

Two Jewish religious types come upon him and see he is bleeding and battered. They each step over and around him and render no aid. A third person happens by. In this religiously charged narrative, this third person stops and does all he can to help.

He is the least important person in Jewish eyes. He is a member of a non-Jewish sect, an outsider, a foreigner who calls Samaria his home. He is considered less than human in Jewish eyes. This Samaritan bandages up the battered traveler, takes him to a first aid station at the inn in the nearest town, pays for his medical bills and instructs the innkeeper to provide whatever is necessary. The bill will be paid in full.

Jesus commends this Good Samaritan and concludes the story saying to his listeners, "Go and do likewise." Here is where human imagination takes lofty flight.

St. Augustine living in the fourth century says it's all about symbols. Fourteen to be precise. I wonder how long he had to stay up late at night to come up with these fourteen. See if you can follow along.

1. The man going down to Jericho is a symbol for Adam.
2. Jerusalem as the high point of the journey from which he departs - is symbol for Heaven.
3. The robbers - symbolize the Devil.
4. They strip him – a symbol taking away his Immortality.
5. They beat him and leave him to die - means he is dead to Sin.
6. The priest - is the Law.
7. The Levites - are the Prophets.
8. The Good Samaritan - is the ideal Christian.

9. The binding up of the wounds is the protection from future sin.
10. The donkey is the Body of Jesus.
11. The inn is the Church.
12. The two coins are the Old Testament and the New Testament.
13. The Innkeeper is the Apostle Paul.
14. The return of the Good Samaritan that's obviously the Second Coming on the final Day of Judgment.

That's how medieval thinking worked. Wow! Sorta takes your breath away. What a creative imagination Augustine had. Can you imagine the folks in the 4th century trying to listen to a two-hour sermon about this? Jesus would be scratching his head if he'd heard this interpretation, "Did I say that?"

The story of the Good Samaritan has produced interesting interpretations. Some I understand. Some I do not. One I do not understand is that of Joel Osteen. He is a fundamentalist pastor in Houston who preaches in front of large numbers each week. He chooses a fundamental interpretation. Instead of the fourteen points of Augustine, Osteen suggests there is just one.

A man stops to help. He stops for one reason and one reason only – he knew God had specially placed him on that road that day for the purpose of bringing the wounded Jew to Jesus. My goodness. I must have missed that part of the story.

And furthermore, says Joel Osteen, whenever you meet the needs of someone else, God will then meet your needs. Sounds like the Prosperity Gospel of affluent Christianity. Especially a prosperity theology with all the conditionalities that are inherent in that deceptive thinking.

And here comes the point of his sermon. A point that is hard for me to even begin to comprehend but here it is. The opposite is also true. Whatever goodness you fail to render means that God will make sure you get your just punishments as well.

Ouch! And we wonder why folks are leaving the Church in droves. Almost makes me want to go with them. There are volumes of bad theology and bad sermons awaiting your time and money. But you will have to get in line. There are lots of folks ahead of you.

So put aside medieval Augustine. Put aside financially-based and punishment-driven Osteen and reflect with me for a moment on the thoughts of Martin Luther King, Jr. He used this story the last time he ever spoke in public. He had gone to Memphis in April 1968, marching in support of sanitation workers.

Two of them, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, had been crushed to death in a tragic mechanical malfunction on their sanitation truck. In those days, city rules had forbidden black employees from seeking shelter from the rain anywhere except in the back of their compressor garbage trucks filled with foul-smelling debris. They died gruesome, needless deaths.

The Civil Rights Movement sought to address those subhuman conditions. It sought to change the rules which allowed white workers to stop and go inside a building or garage. That's why Dr. King was in Memphis.

The night before he died Dr. King spoke about the message of Jesus and how it impacted the real, nitty-gritty, everyday world. He said:

The bottom line of the Gospel is not our personal spiritual salvation. It's not about being rewarded or punished by a divine being who sits on a throne and is prepared to hurl thunder bolts at us. The real point of this story is about rendering aid: Will we go and do likewise, just as Jesus says, because it's the right thing to do?

He then added this thought:

If travelers keep getting assaulted, beaten and robbed, on this miserable road shouldn't someone be asking the more important question?

1. Why does this keep happening?
2. Shouldn't we be addressing the causes?
3. Shouldn't we join the Jericho Road Improvement Association and find out why folks keep getting mugged?

Maybe then we could stop the next assault from happening.

That's a message which speaks to me. That's a reading of this story I can identify with. Augustine with his fourteen symbolic points has his head way up in the clouds. Dr. King has his two feet planted firmly on the ground.

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Jim Wallis of Sojourners Institute speaks of a social justice ministry working to fulfill both Jesus' and Dr. King's call to help others. For the sake of helping others. Not about receiving some divine reward in the future or avoiding some divine punishment. It's about helping others.

Jim Wallis says those who are engaged in ministry to others:

They all understand that you cannot just pull the bodies out of the river. You need to send somebody upstream to see what or who keeps throwing them in."

That's a powerful way to read this parable. "Go and do likewise". Go and challenge the conditions that create poverty and misery in the first place. That's part of the Biblical call for social justice.

A minister colleague of mine from Texas was asked last year to be part of a clergy writing group that would submit articles for publication in the local newspaper. Submit a spiritual message representative of your faith or congregation.

He agreed. Wrote his article. And sent it in. Two days later the editor called him. "Thank you for submitting this article." "You are welcome" he replied.

"We have one request. In your article you refer in a critical way to the US government's intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan." "Yes, I did" he said.

"Would you mind removing that reference?"

"But that's the whole point of the article. We are doing a terrible injustice to the people there, especially the refugees, the women and the children."

"Well" said the editor. "We'll just have to drop the article all together. That's not what our readers want to hear."

My colleague as he reflects back on that experience now says:

Clergy who want to talk about real events in the world are seen as too political for the religious section. And they are seen as too religious for the political section. Of course, if a minister gets in the pulpit and waves the flag and prays for the troops, that's not called "political", but if a minister questions any war, then it is considered mixing religion and politics.

I'm beginning to understand what he said. Having submitted my share of bland, dry-as-dust, watered-down clergy messages for local newspapers over the years, I recognize how boring they were, how meaningless they were, how out of touch with the real world they were. The kinds of things editors love to receive because they don't offend any reader or won't rattle any ecclesiastical trees.

The result is a kind of insipidness that passes for clergy columns of 21st century Americana. The real result is that these submissions do nothing but validate their placement in the Saturday paper. You'll find them strategically placed somewhere between the obituaries and the funny papers. Because that's where they seem to fit best. They are either sadly, deadly or comically, laughable. Certainly not alive with serious relevance.

Messages that talk about mistreatment of others, the pain of others, the causes of that mistreatment or the underlying reasons for the pain of others is what needs to be said. And most of the time is not.

Dr. King wanted to talk about real events in the real world. He and folks like Jim Wallis want to know who keeps throwing folks in the river and how we could get that to stop.

That's the heart of Jesus' ministry. Caring for those in need. The Good Samaritan story is a visual picture of what that looks like when the question of social justice comes up. We render aid first and then seek to address the causes. Shouldn't we be asking, why does this keep happening?

Travelers on that road from Jerusalem to Jericho are in need of a good hospital when they meet bad guys.

Should we not start paving that road, installing lights, and asking the patrol officers to check on its safety?

That's the part of the story that keeps getting left out.