

Luke 10.25 I know, but...

There are a couple of words in the English dictionary which seem to carry more weight than their size would seem to indicate. One of them is the word “if”. That word as a preface can express hope or regret, dreams or excuses. Another word with only one more letter also can be an indication that something significant follows which alters the initial understanding. For example, it didn’t take long for me to realize that when shopping with my teenage daughter that our views of what was attractive did not overlap. I was still the one providing her clothing but knew she would want input into the purchase. When we went shopping together I would point out something that I thought attractive...her usual response became, yes Mom, it is pretty, but... I soon grew to realize that if we bought it...whatever it was, it would hang unworn in the closet. Because “It was pretty, but...” In some respects this conversation between Jesus and someone from the crowd identified in Luke as a lawyer reminds me of that use of the word “but” when it gets added on to a statement. Today’s reading is a well known story from Luke’s gospel which has become known as the parable of the Good Samaritan, although the descriptive word good is not in the text but was added as a title by translators later. Although the parable itself is unique to Luke, the introductory portion found in verses 25-29 is not unique. Those verses are found with some variation as a conversation in each of the three synoptic gospels. In Matthew (19: 16) and Mark (10:17) the same question asked is posed by a young man with many possessions while in Luke the question is asked by a lawyer. In all three narratives the question asked is the same: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” In all three narratives Jesus responds by questioning the questioner. In Luke, Jesus asks him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” In other words, Jesus asks this lawyer who is assumed would know the Torah about what is found there. The second part of the question asking what do you read there would probably make more sense if it were translated at “How do you read there?” since that would change it from two questions about content to one about content and a second about interpretation. In Matthew and Mark, the discussions involve listing various individual commandments given to the Israelites at Mount Sinai. In Luke, the lawyer answers by giving the summary found in Deuteronomy and Leviticus: “You shall love the

Lord your God with all you heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus tells the man, “You have given the right answer.” In other words the man knew the answer before he asked the question. This is where that “I know, but...” phrase echoes in my mind. It seems the man wanted some clarification about the answer he himself had given. The follow up question seems like the answer he got had some implications that he wanted to avoid. The lawyer already knows what is expected of him, but he probably suspects that he isn’t meeting those expectations. In fact, he probably suspects that he doesn’t actually want to be obedient to the full extent of the law. So he is looking for a way to set the bar lower. One translation of this text describes his motivation as a desire to declare himself righteous, for in Mark and Matthew he indicates that he feels that he is fulfilling those requirements, but it seems that he also feels that something is still lacking. Another translation phrases it as wanting to justify himself. The lawyer wants to pin down exactly what is required for the sake of justice in light of God’s commandment. Whatever his motivation, he then asks Jesus the follow up question, “And who is my neighbor?” This man who knows the Torah, the Law of God, basically says, I know the commandments, but...This is the point at which Jesus begins to tell a story; the story of a man who was traveling down from Jerusalem and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him and went away leaving him half dead. This scenario would not have been surprising at all to those listening to this exchange. The road to Jericho was known to be dangerous because of bandits. As the story unfolds, other travelers come down the road by the wounded man: a priest, a Levite and a Samaritan. We know the story—the priest and the Levite pass by on the other side of the road—they do not want to jeopardize their religious purity by coming in contact with him. They view the man and his condition as a burden which would delay them in accomplishing whatever task or duty that has caused them to travel down this road in the first place. The Samaritan however, unexpectedly, stops and cares for the man. That the Samaritan did this we understand as being totally unexpected for those who heard this story because of the known hostility felt between Jews and Samaritans. The audience would not have expected a Samaritan to show compassion for a Jewish man. Although not stated, because of the location of the story, the man would have probably been Jewish. So when Jesus asks the man at the end

of the story, “Which of these, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” We like the lawyer agree that it was the Samaritan. In fact, listeners in Jesus’ time or the gospel writer’s time or any century since then understand that the parable shows us that our neighbor is the one we least expect to be a neighbor. The neighbor is the “other”, the one most despised or feared or not like us. Jesus has shifted the question from the one the lawyer asked—“who is my neighbor?” to one slightly different. Jesus is asking, “What does a righteous neighbor do?” Really the parable answers both questions. When we look at this parable we often make some assumptions that the original audience would not have made. We usually look at it from outside the story—as an observer who looking at the behaviors of the priest and Levite in a judgmental manner. We tend to think that they should have provided care for the wounded man, but didn’t because of legalistic religious concerns. The usual comparison is then made to our own behavior and the tendency to let categories of race or class or religion to define “otherness” so that we ignore the humanness those others. The usual interpretation is to judge negatively the priest and the Levite and to take the Samaritan as the ethical role model. But what if instead of standing outside the story, we view the story as Jesus’ invitation to the lawyer to enter the story and see himself as a participant. If we then use the lawyer as our lens through which to view the story, we experience the story differently. The lawyer being Jewish would obviously not identify with the Samaritan as because of the hostility between the two groups. He represented the despised “other”. I doubt that the lawyer would also not empathize with the priest or the Levite either because they represented things within Judaism related to function, class, observance and biblical interpretation. Seen that way, who is left? The only character left through which to enter the story is the one who is given no identity except life-threatening wounds. The lawyer understands the point that Jesus is making, according to the gospel narrative. It is the Samaritan who is the neighbor to the wounded man. The lawyer understands that when you receive life-saving mercy, “otherness” ceases and instead there is only our common humanity. When Jesus’ gives the lawyer the final words: “Go and do likewise.” It then becomes more than an injunction to a charitable response to care for the “other.” It becomes a command to recognize that we are all human—there is no one who is truly other—and we all need to show and be shown mercy. Jesus in

telling this story has redefined neighbor not in terms of race, religion, or proximity, but in terms of vulnerability; that is, whoever is in need is your neighbor. And what Jesus actually asks at the end is not who was the Samaritan's neighbor. Instead Jesus asks, who acted like a neighbor? Again, the answer remains the Samaritan for he went out of his way to care for the wounded man. So the neighbor isn't simply the one in need, but rather the one who provides for our need, the one who takes care of us. We often find this mutuality uncomfortable. We spend so much of our time, energy, and money trying to be invulnerable, trying precisely to need as little as possible from those around us. Yet it seems to me that this parable is telling us that according to Jesus being neighbor involves not only giving help but also being willing to receive it, especially to and from those we don't normally see as "like us". The distinctions we make today among those we encounter are based on the same tendency that Jesus described—the perception that we are not all the same fundamentally; that there are differences which keep us from seeing each other as fellow children of God who are both vulnerable and need mercy and are compassionate and can give mercy. The events of this past week demonstrate our desire to keep the barriers in place instead of seeking to understand that in the eyes of God we are all the wounded man in the ditch for whom Jesus came. We need to stop asking the question "And who is my neighbor?", because we know that Jesus placed no boundaries on it. There is no "I know, but...in God's eyes. Thanks be to God.