

There was a story in the *Texas Monthly* some years back, about rare diseases. A doctor was explaining why it was difficult for doctors and researchers to uncover particularly rare diseases, and he said: “*When you hear hoof-beats, you don’t think of zebras.*” That’s true, isn’t it? We are conditioned to think of events, to assign meaning, based on our experience and even our cultural assumptions. An African might think of zebras, and a Peruvian llamas, but it’s hard to imagine what doesn’t usually cross your mind. The great psychologist Abraham Maslow said the same thing, I believe, with his now-famous dictum: “*When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.*”

The Apostle Paul seems to have been up against that with the church in Colossae. This introduction we have is very nice language, Paul at his most eloquent. He gives thanks to God “*The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (he is making a point there) for the faith of the Colossian church and the “*hope they had laid up in heaven.*” That last is a phrase from religion in the Persian court. Then Paul uses the language of Gnosticism – that they be filled with “*all wisdom and spiritual understanding*” “*share in the inheritance of the sons of light*”, “*rescued from the power of darkness*”.

A bunch of pretty language, but there is a zebra here. The Colossians did not come to the Christian faith with blank minds. In fact the whole city was known for being sort of religion-junkies, who were especially subject to the Greek Gnostics. Paul is using their own fanciful language here, to steer them back on course. The rest of the book of Colossians is a masterful job of using the language of which they were enamored, but in ways to lead them back from false teaching. He talks about Jesus, but in their cosmic, Gnostic terms.

He reminds them of how they learned the faith in the first place, from Eraphas, a good guy. And where does he steer them – that they may “*lead lives worthy of the Lord...bear fruit in every good work...and endure with patience.*” They didn’t need spiritual enlightenment and speculation, they needed tangible freedom from sin and oppression, and to live out the way Jesus taught them. But they were Gnostic; religion was more a debating society, abstract speculation. Gnostics were dualists, who – (very abbreviated version) believed in two worlds, spiritual and earthly. A battle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. Spiritual, light, good; physical, dark, bad. Only those with special knowledge of the spiritual realm could attain salvation, and so on.

I heard a theology prof once say: “Old heresies never die; they just change address.” Gnosticism infiltrated Christianity, and you heard it in the types of fundamentalism that said physical needs and desires were bad, unspiritual, didn’t even talk about them. You hear it today anytime you hear someone talk about “spiritual warfare,” or when the New Age practitioner wants to sell you a crystal so you can channel the spirit of Og the ancient Viking warrior, and get some special insight.

Anyway, Gnosticism. And when they weren’t looking, Paul snuck up on them with their own language, and reminded them of Jesus, who was incarnate in human life and had teachings for the real world that they woke up in that morning. The Colossians were spiritualists on steroids, and Paul was gently introducing some realism into their intellectual diet.

There is an unfortunate tendency in Christian Biblical interpretation to over-spiritualize the New Testament. In fact, we treat the Bible backwards. People want to take the allegories of the Old

Testament literally (Jonah and the Whale, e.g.) literally, and to treat the New Testament figuratively (the poor, or the poor in spirit?)

Jonah's whale is a great Hebrew folk tale saying the guy was in trouble he couldn't get out of. And what if when Jesus said to preach good news to the poor, he meant, well, the poor?

As early as Augustine (and I usually like Augustine, but...) they did this. St. Augustine's take on the Good Samaritan parable was that the man who went down from Jericho was Adam himself, Jerusalem the heavenly city from which Adam fell, the thieves were the devil and his angels which stripped Adam of his immortality, left him half dead insofar as we're oppressed by sin, the Samaritan being the Lord himself, the oil being the comfort of good hope, the wine being the work of the spirit, the inn being the church and the innkeeper the Apostle Paul.... Wow. I imagine that Paul himself would have been horrified at being associated with such nonsense.

And how similar is the Gospel lesson for today? We have heard the story of the Good Samaritan so many times that we probably *don't* hear it any more, but our old tape kicks in for us. Perhaps we really do understand this parable, but let's hear it again.

A teacher of the Law asked Jesus a question, in order to test him. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" It's a trick question, to see how Jesus interprets scripture.

Jesus answers with a question, to which the lawyer has the answer: "What is written in the law?"

The lawyer answers with the Shema: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength and all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus answers: "Right answer. Do that and you will live."

The lawyer is not done: "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus tells the parable: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who left him half dead. Both a priest and a teacher of the law passed by and did nothing, but a Samaritan traveler rescued him, went out of the way to tend his wounds and used his own funds to put him up in an inn, guaranteeing to cover expenses. Who was a neighbor to him?"

The lawyer says, "The one who showed mercy." And Jesus said, "Well, there you go."

There are some obvious things here. Both Jesus and the lawyer give the right answers to the questions they ask one another. But you get the sense the teacher of the law is not happy with his own answers. He has asked a question in order to trap Jesus. Jesus asked a question in order to teach the teacher. Being right does not mean that you know the ways of God. Jesus' challenge to the teacher of the law was that a nearly-pagan outsider might know more about love than the priests of Israel. And yes, we can draw the lesson that you win eternal life not by following the ethic of law but by following the ethic of love. Is religion about restrictions and regulations, or is it about endless opportunity to show mercy?

There is the temptation to retell this parable and put modern folks in it. "A guy was going down from Birmingham to Mobile, and fell into the hands of robbers who left him half dead in a truck stop. And a pastor and an ethics prof at UAB both passed by and ignored him. Then came... and who shall be put for the Samaritan? A Mormon. One of the members of the Muslim Temple in

Hoover. Richard Scrushy. Dick Cheney. Nancy Pelosi. (Fill in the blank with your least favorite mayoral candidate.)

I think that's too easy, and it doesn't do the parable justice to say something so simple as "there's goodness in folks, and our prejudices and assumptions can be way wrong." That's true enough. But it may not say enough about this text.

The lawyer has asked, "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*" And Jesus told a story about someone who, he says, is already living it out. The Samaritan. Jesus doesn't call him "good", but describes what it is like to be a citizen of heaven, who is already living out that citizenship. Not bound by the usual constraints of our human cultures.

What is also interesting is the answer to the lawyer's second question, "*Who is my neighbor?*" Jesus doesn't answer that question, but instead turns it and answers the question "To whom can I *be* a neighbor?" It is a hoof-beats of zebras sort of an answer. To whom can I *be* a neighbor? To anyone whose need lays a claim on my love.

BUT, let's turn it again. (Listen for the zebras.) What do we know about the person half-dead on the road? Nothing. And no point in speculating about different personas that could be. He is Everyman - neither ally nor enemy, a person without distinction. You and me. As the lawyer heard this parable, there was only one person he could really have imagined lying half-dead on the road, and that was himself. Which is how Biblical scholar Walter Wink would have us read all Biblical stories – by imagining yourself as each person in the story. What does it mean *then*?

Brandon Scott summarizes the parable: "*to enter the Kingdom one must get into the ditch and be served by one's mortal enemy*", he says. "*Grace comes to those who cannot resist, who have no alternative other than to accept it... Only one who needs grace can receive grace.*" It is that amazing grace we sing about when, a) you have not earned it, b) cannot expect it, and c) it comes from somewhere you could not have imagined. Hoof-beats of zebras.

One scholar would have us describe parables by their first line, so as not to skew out thoughts prematurely. So this one would be called: "A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers who left him half dead." And at the end, the parable leaves us with two questions. To whom can I be a neighbor? ...and... Who will I allow to be neighbor to me? Because finally we are in the ditch together; there's very few of us here who do not come wounded to the Lord's table, who do not find our way in here damaged at some level by life in this world. The paradox is this – that the Risen Lord is wherever two or more gather. And when we are together, we have a neighbor's grace and mercy to give, and also to receive. Thanks be to God.