

The World I Want to Live In

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Some of you may know this, but I went to seminary in Berkeley. Not because it's of its reputation for being radical; it's that I didn't want to leave California for this snowy climb of Minnesota. And because it was radical. It sounded fun to me, and it was.

The seminary there sits on top of very high hill, and you can see the Oakland Bay Bridge and the Golden Gate. It's a glorious setting, and I'll be honest the first time I was there, I cried. I couldn't believe they let me in. (Some of my classmates felt the same way, of course).

It was full of mysteries. On introduction day—when you're confused by everything, and you're new and you're anxious—one of the opening things just had me and my classmates just completely baffled. They said:

Welcome to the GTU. If you want to go down to the library, it's across from PSR and you'll take most of your classes that JSTB, and some of you can even take a few electives at FST.

I thought, *my goodness, I have landed in an alphabet soup!*

When you're new and you want to do it right, it's scary to not understand everything, but we quickly caught on. We knew that FST was the Franciscan School, and JSTB was Jesuit, and GTU was the Graduate Theological Union. It's a consortium of ten seminary, a really wonderfully ecumenical education.

But the one thing that I was buffaloeed by that entire first year was the often-repeated reference to the long gospel. I knew that mark was the shortest gospel, and I kept looking at the number of chapters and verses and words in the other gospels, trying to determine what the long gospel was. My classmates used the phrase freely—they all seemed to know—but I never asked what it was. I was so glad I didn't, because at the end of the year I realized they'd been saying *law and gospel*. Had I asked, they would've sorted out right away that I truly did not belong there, even though I had made my way through the alphabet soup. It was very confusing.

But what you and I know is that the law and gospel are crucial to our understanding of our own faith walk, right? And Luther wrote extensively about the law, describing it as *a mirror in which we see our true selves*, or the law is *what drives us to God for forgiveness, so the law has a particular purpose*. (It can seem a little long at times).

You and I talk about the law and the gospel in a variety of ways. Sometimes we might call it

the carrot and the stick
tough love
consequences
this is what happens if you do that
make your bed, you have to lie in it

So, humanity has kind of created its own version of law and gospel, not that it mirrors what's in scripture. Scripture looks at

this balance between law and gospel a little differently, and in Luke's gospel this morning we find all the characters wrestling with that balance, right?

What must I do to be saved?

How do I figure that out?

What can I get away with?

When do I need to fall to my knees?

What can I expect when I fall to my knees?

What will God dish out?

So, all the characters are kind of wrestling with that.

This man who approaches Jesus, he's kind of rooting himself in the Old Testament, really rooting himself in Leviticus 9. All those rules and regulations about what people ought to do and say, and be? He's really pretty confident about that.

When he approaches Jesus, my sense is he's kind of looking around to see if people are watching this exchange. I'm imagining that this fellow—this lawyer—wants to trap Jesus and embarrass him, so he asks a very obvious question: *What I do to be saved?*

You may have asked yourself that at some point, right? In the midst of some kind of controversy or disagreement with a loved one or a stranger, and you think to yourself, *what must I do to be saved in this particular situation?*

But this fellow Luke's talking about, he's pretty sure he knows the answer because Jesus says, *what's in the law?*

And he says, *you know, love God with all you've got and love your neighbor.*

And he's feeling pretty good about that. It was a good question that he asked, but then he wants to justify himself. He wants to one-up Jesus. *I know the answer. I would like the crowd to acknowledge that I know the answer.* And then Jesus invites him in, and the fellow makes a fatal mistake:

Who's my neighbor?

Oops. Wrong question for Jesus. It's a wrong question for the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Who's my neighbor? The guy next door? The lady upstairs? I like both of them. I'd be glad to help them in a pinch.

Jesus tells a parable that is this man's undoing. If we're honest, it's meant to be our undoing as well. That is the point of the parables. It is—as Luther says—a mirror that we can hold up to see who it is we really are.

Jesus begins to talk about this guy who gets beat up and robbed. Two church workers—temple staff—they pass him by. Not only do they pass him by, but they hightail it to the other side.

I've done a version of that, which is I pull up to the off ramp where there's somebody there with the sign, and I absolutely find something fascinating in the opposite direction. I don't want

to see it. If I don't see it, it's not there, right? It disappears. I don't have to do anything. I just won't look.

Some of us experience that in marriage or long-term relationships. *I didn't hear you say that. I did not hear that.* Bill and I go round and round about that all the time, especially for getting together or other social things. He's absolutely positive I never brought it up and I want to argue, but we've been married long enough that I know that's pointless.

So these church workers, they crossed the other side. We need to put those three characters—the guy who's robbed, the Levites, and the priest—into some context so we can kind of unpack this.

First of all, this path that this guy took is notoriously dangerous. He made a mistake. He shouldn't have been there. And the fact that he got robbed, we might say he made his bed and he's got to lie in it. It's like you and I walking into an alley about one o'clock in the morning, and then just being so surprised that we're accosted and robbed. That's what happened on this road; it was famous for that.

This Levite and the priest, they're on their way to work. If they touch blood, they are unclean. They will have to go back home, and the people who are going to be relieved when they get to the temple, they'll be stuck there. They didn't have cell phones. They couldn't call ahead and say, *we're sacrificially, unclean. We need to go back home and we'll get there as soon as we can.*

So, in a lot of ways, they're being wonderfully responsible, right? I mean, I pull up to the off-ramp and I look the other way. And every once in a while, I think, *maybe you should get a job. Maybe you should stop drinking. Maybe you shouldn't have made that choice, so I could look the other way.*

That is a story of humanity.

I remember in downtown Seattle once, they built housing for for men who were still drinking. The public was outraged that they would use tax dollars to build a nine-story building and house people who were alcoholics. *They did it to themselves, right?* Except what they discovered is people stopped drinking when they got stable housing, and it costs fewer tax dollars because they weren't showing up in emergency rooms from getting beat up, or falling, or all the things that happen when you're living on the street.

There's a way of doing the law, and there's a way of doing the gospel. And these two men—the Levite and the priest—are fearful about not doing what the law says. They're following their understanding of scripture.

Then Jesus does this really sharp turn. He says, *a Samaritan comes along.*

Now Jews and Samaritans, they despised one another. Samaritans are Jewish, but the Jews didn't think they were Jewish. They were at each other. When Jesus describes this Samaritan being helpful and kind, I can imagine the whole

crowd going, *not a Samaritan for heaven's sake! Not one of those guys! They're horrible! They're less than human!*

I have my own category for that, too: people that I like to look down my nose at.

So, this Samaritan helps this guy who has been robbed.

Martin Luther King had a few things to say about this particular parable, and what he said is that the priest and the Levite were worried about what would happen to *them* if they helped this guy. The Samaritan wondered what would happen to *the guy* if he **didn't** help him.

And here's the kicker: the Samaritan was worried about what what kind of a person he would be if he looked away and whether he was willing to pay that price.

The Samaritan acted out of mercy.

Jesus said it, ***the Samaritan acted in a way that would describe the kind of world he wants to live in: a world that is full of mercy, even for the foolish and the undeserving.***

I remember when Micah, our son, was about five and in the morning he had been being kind of a goof. And I said to him, *if you're very good at the end of the day, I will give you a treat.* Well, he continued to pretty much be a jerk for the whole day. He could not get it right. He was kinda snotty and just misbehaving. And at the end of the day, I said: *Here's what I decided to do, Micah. I've decided to give it to you anyway.*

He started to cry. *I don't deserve it, mama.*

No, you don't.

I decided to show mercy.

In so many ways in our world that was nonsensical. In so many ways it sounds indulgent. It sounds unwilling to teach this little boy that there are consequences for your behavior, but you know what? My son is a wonderful man.

He is kind and generous.

He's willing to help people who are not always deserving.

He is kind to his mother who wasn't always merciful.

Jesus said, *go and do likewise.*

And—like the Samaritan—that's the kind of world I want to live in.

How about you?

Amen.