

Reflection: Enemy Perspective
Amos 7: 1-17; Luke 10: 25-37

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A number of years back I took a storytelling workshop. I was unaware of how many people in our society were regular practitioners of this art and that they had a full range of skills and techniques to share and pass along—not to mention stories. The art of storytelling is perhaps much more alive in aboriginal cultures than others. The experience was really rich.

One of the techniques I learned about was the (not accidental) use of the number three. Often the point or punch line is told on the third example. The best known example is, of course, the *Three Little Pigs*. First pig—house of straw, second pig house of sticks, but the third pig a strong and sturdy set of bricks. The point of the story—if you want to be safe from wolves—build a strong shelter—even if it takes more work. The use of three is also a technique to help the storyteller remember the details of the story. Once your awareness is drawn to this reality you will notice it in all kinds of stories.

I tell you this because it is one of the tactics employed by Jesus the storyteller in today's tale—*The Good Samaritan*. First person—the Priest—finds a person in a ditch but passes by on the other side. The second person—the Levite—passes by on the other side. The third person—the Samaritan—is the one who stops and helps. In an oral culture, the peasant Israelites who first heard this story from Jesus would have been well acquainted with how the issue of threes worked. In fact it would have been like a cliché for them. Kind of like our use of it in jokes...you know the kind...Three clergy were at the gates of heaven: a catholic, an Anglican and a United...

So as Jesus started into his story the Israelites would have been completely with him. A man in need was on the side of the road...however the cliché they were used to always went like this: A Priest, A Levite and then an Israelite. As they were listening along they might have been anticipating Jesus' third point—thinking ah we know what he is going to say...and then it would be an Israelite who did the right thing; who helped someone in need; who demonstrated the kind of love of neighbour that Jesus was talking about. So this familiarity with the medium was what added to the shock of the story that we sometimes miss so many years later.

It should have been that an Israelite did the right thing and it was a Samaritan—the arch enemy of the devout Jew. Samaritans were those who were said not to follow the Law of Moses, and if you recall earlier in the gospel of Luke—it was Samaria that rejected Jesus mission when he and his followers set foot there. How is it that the least likely were the example and not the Israelites? Perhaps the point then is for the hearers to find themselves in a different part of the story.

The Good Samaritan is such a familiar story—inside and outside the church that it almost doesn't impact us or have any shock effect. Just this past week a newspaper headline read: "Good Samaritan stops to Help". It is used as a fine example of a call to help when we can and to move from self-preoccupation to care for other. This is its simplest (and not harmful) interpretation. And don't we often assume we are the ones who are the Good Samaritans? If we saw someone in need of trouble we would stop. Or we guilt ourselves into feeling badly when we don't have time to stop, don't notice a need; or shy away from someone in need out of fear or judgment.

But if the Israelites and we were not the Samaritans, could it be that we are to picture ourselves; insert ourselves into the story as the one lying in the ditch? What meaning comes then? This messes with our order of things. Think about the fact that if we were lying on a roadside; fighting off death; and our arch enemy—our despised-not-to-be-trusted neighbour showed up to help—would we send them away because they were untouchable; despised enemy? Or do we realize as they bind up our wounds and pour oil on them that our very survival depends on this enemy. (Stephen J. Patterson, *The God of Jesus*)

Here the storyteller invites us into parable, into finding experience rather than example. That is—by seeing ourselves as the one laid low and in need of compassion, Jesus invites the listener into an experience of true love and compassion—the way of God rather than seeing ourselves simply as those with a list of rules and moral code.

[There was commentary this week in the *Vancouver Sun* about our need, now, since the death of homeless man Curtis Brick, to have a Preparedness and Response Plan by the city in order to avoid homeless people being passed by in the middle of a heat wave—succumbing to dehydration. Peter McMartin, wondered if we might simply use common sense or notice of people in need. (Vancouver Sun, Thursday July 8th, 2010.)]

As the one lying on the road do you pray the world functions with Grace and compassion or as one who is right and who follows rules of order and responsibility? Who is friend and foe?

The lawyer who asks the question of what he must do to inherit eternal life is all about the rules—exactly who is my neighbour and how far of a circle do I have to draw—Jesus throws it back at him—how far of a circle do we need to draw—to live—fully. How big of a circle would you draw if you were on the outside?

This choice is given us in everyday mundane ways and in politically acute ones.

Many of you know that years ago in my preparation for ministry I spent a summer in rural Saskatchewan on a four month internship. I chose this site to expose my city slicker ways to a different reality. I landed in a two-point pastoral

charge near North Battleford called Maidstone-Paynton. I lived in the smaller of the towns—Paynton which held a population of 211—212 if you included me! I had a fantastic internship and loved the church there and the people taught me well everything from funeral visits to making Saskatoon berry pie. But I lived frustrated by the closeness of the town and people's involvement in my life. They knew what time I got up in the morning, when I got paid and how much, what I ate for dinner, who my visitors were and when I watered my garden.

Every morning at 10 o'clock people from the town would gather at the NessCafe on the corner of Main Street and the Highway. It was part of my job to join that gathering periodically. But I was afraid of it. I was afraid of the prairie stare-down I got every time I entered; I was afraid of their being no room to sit; I was afraid of the farmers who had no time for the church and therefore I assumed not me; and I was afraid of the owner—Ness—who would periodically emerge from the garage, fingers stained with grease and oil—to pour himself a cup of coffee. We never exchanged words.

The time came at the end of the summer and I was looking forward to returning to the city and my comfortable anonymity and apparent freedom. With great boldness I phone up Ness early on the last day I was there to find out how long he was open that day as his was the only stopping point for Greyhound buses which was how I was shipping all my belongings back home. 6 O'Clock. The time was only 10 I had lots of time. I spent the day packing and cleaning and attending to details. I was far behind and worried that I would not make the six o'clock time—it would mean an extra day in town and missing my flight home. At 5:55pm the phone rang—it was Ness. "When are you bringing your stuff—I am staying open." Shocked I said: "I am almost done—just a few minutes." Click. End of conversation.

"Great," I thought "now I've missed my chance." Less than two minutes later a pick up truck pulled up outside my door. Ness stepped out and came to my door. "Never mind," he said..."I got these." He loaded everything up and started to leave. "Wait!" I said...I've got to come and get them weighed and pay. He got a small smile on his face and said: "It's my job to weigh them—they take my word—just give me 25 bucks." Then he turned around and said: "You better get going—they are waiting for you at the hall." I walked down the short gravel road to the town curling rink where the whole town was hosting a dinner in order to send me on my way. Tears rolled down my face as I realized how much easier my load had become thanks to Ness at a frantic time of moving and saying goodbye. I was a person of rules and anonymity but I needed a neighbour.

The primary concern of the person in the gospel story who asks the question of Jesus is eternal life. He wants to know how he can obtain eternal bliss and contentment. In the past we have concerned ourselves in what this means for the time after we die. But the stories offer us a glimpse of experiencing what that

eternal life is in the now and here. When we know deep compassion and then go and do likewise then we know a breadth and depth and sweetness of life now. When Jesus invites us to imagine erring on the side of compassion rather than rightness he suggests we move from a partial life to a full one.

In the tradition of parables—a final story: A few years ago a twelve-year-old Palestinian boy, Ahmad Khatib, had been shot and killed by Israeli soldiers during street fighting near his house in Jenin, the West Bank. The boy had been holding a toy gun. He was taken to an Israeli hospital where he died after two days. His parents made the decision to allow his organs to be harvested for transplant to Israelies. Six people received his heart, lungs, and kidneys, including a two-month-old infant. His mother, Abla, said, “My son has died. Maybe he can give life to others.”

Whether it be in moving boxes or heart-transplants—Christ bids us find our way to life-eternal where we move from the partial to the fullness of God’s compassion and love.

May it be so. Amen.