CHAPTER FOUR

From Jerusalem to Jericho

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." (Luke 10:30-35)

This much-loved parable is by no means simple. It requires five characters plus a gang of bandits and a beast. Its plot includes five scenes and the promise of a sixth. And as given by Luke, the parable itself is a scene within another narrative plot, a story within the story of Jesus and a certain lawyer. Inside that larger story, the parable works like a buried explosive—the stunning narrative surprise shakes and shifts the ground of the lawyer's perspective, and our own. Robert Funk may well be correct when he writes, "There is no other parable in the Jesus tradition that carries a comparable punch."[1]

The Frame Story Begun (vv. 25-29)

The parable is set within a frame that adds its own dynamic to the tale. It is difficult to imagine preaching the parable apart from the story that frames it. The two stories are set in tight counterpoint.[2] The parable erupts from its context like a springing leopard.

Just prior to the lawyer's appearance, Jesus has spoken of the great reversal—outsiders turned to insiders and vice versa. Hearing the exuberant report of the seventy, just returned from their mission, he thanks God: "because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants" (10:21).

"And look *[kai idou]*," says Luke, "a lawyer stood up." Clearly, he is one of "the wise and the intelligent," a professional in the application of Torah. Intending to "test" Jesus, he asks, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (v. 25). The question, apparently, is hollow. Though one might "test" any rabbi's teaching quite sincerely by seeking his answer to a fundamental question, Luke's report that the lawyer's follow-up question was "to justify himself" suggests that he was posing from the start. As in so much religious talk, he isn't asking the ultimate questions; he is fondling them.

The lawyer's question is met with a counterquestion: "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" Jesus has turned it back on him. It is worth pointing out that to such a question as the lawyer's, Jesus would never resort to parable. Both the question and the answer are too basic for indirect discourse. The way to life is clearly set forth in the Torah; the questioner already knows it. One recalls the final speech of Moses to Israel: "Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven.... Neither is it beyond the sea.... No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe" (Deut 30:11-14). Some older lectionaries actually link this text to our parable, though the Revised Common Lectionary does not.

The lawyer complies with the answer to his own question. It is a merging of the Shema's command to love God entirely (Deut 6:5) and the command of the Holiness Code to love one's neighbor as oneself (Lev 19:18). In parallel accounts (Mark 12:28-31; Matt 22:34-40), it is Jesus who joins these two great commands. Luke

would have us recall that such insight was already held in Israel.[3] Jesus here does not instruct a student of Torah but confirms him: "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." As Luke repeatedly insists, from his first scene of a Torah-keeping priestly couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth (1:5-6), to his last scene of disciples "continually in the temple" (24:53), Jesus and his way are in perfect continuity with Israel's faith.

The dialogue to this point presents the following pattern: the lawyer asks a question; Jesus asks a counterquestion; the lawyer gives an answer; Jesus gives a counteranswer. In what follows, the pattern is repeated. The lawyer asks a question ("And who is my neighbor?"); Jesus asks a counterquestion (the parable + "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor . . . ?"); the lawyer gives an answer ("The one who showed him mercy"); Jesus gives a counteranswer ("Go and do likewise").[4] Notice other similarities in the repeated pattern. To both of the lawyer's questions is added an ascription of negative motive. Both of Jesus' counterquestions use pointed second-person verbs ("What do you read there?" "Which do you think?"). Both of Jesus' counteranswers, affirming the lawyer's reply, are imperatives to "do" it ("Do *[poiei]* this and you will live"; "Go and do *[poiei]* likewise").

Though the lawyer's motive is "to justify himself," his question "And who is my neighbor?" has more objective merit than we might think. No one could ask such a question for whom love is a dreamy abstraction. If love is a nice fuzzy feeling, one can easily say, "I just love everybody!" But if love means concrete action, expending actual resources on real people—that is, if love is taken seriously—then one might well ask where the boundaries are. With pressing needs everywhere and limited resources, are we not forced to choose whose needs to serve? So the lawyer's question was, in fact, a debated issue of the day. "Neighbor" in Leviticus 19 refers to one's own people, and yet the same chapter also commands love for "the stranger who sojourns with you" (Lev 19:33-34 RSV). But now, in 30 C.E., Judea is overrun with "strangers," among whom the faithful are under many forms of threat. When your own people are oppressed, the command to love your neighbor as yourself takes on a new pathos; and the question "Who is my neighbor?" is ethically real.

But Jesus seems unimpressed with the question. He counters with a parable that turns it completely on its head.[5] One gets the impression that before he opens his mouth, there is a weighty silence, a sharp gaze, the charged air that precedes lightning.

The Parable

The story has its coordinates on an actual landscape. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was solidly real to Jesus' hearers. It was a road with a reputation. First-century writers described it as a wild place, with violent men close by.[6] The road was seventeen miles long—a steep climb toward Jerusalem, a steep descent toward Jericho—a sharply turning, desolate, dangerous trek.

Down that curving, rugged road, "a certain person *[anthrōpos tis]*" was descending. All other characters in the parable will be described in terms of their social location, but the traveler is given no descriptors at all (though certainly he is a Jewish male). He could, therefore, be anyone. We may see him as a kind of Everyone—not in the allegorical sense, but in the sense that the narrative's choice to leave him undescribed invites universal identification.

True to the road's reputation, violence erupts upon the traveler. He falls among bandits who abuse him, as described in a fast flurry of four verbs. The text reports their actions in forceful participles: stripping him, striking blows on him, going off, leaving him half dead. The verbs point to their cruelty. Their beating of the man (with clubs, fists, feet?) occurs after they have humiliated him and made him defenseless by stripping him. It is the picture of senseless, murderous group violence. Knowing the road's reputation, we might have anticipated trouble, but the brutal details sober us. This man, reduced to our common nakedness and on the brink of our common death, is a figure now of the most elemental and raw human need.

Is the story crafted so as to invite our identification with this man? Quite possibly. Robert Funk has championed this position.[7] He argues that the parable's point of view is that of the victim, that its hearers "take up a vantage point in the ditch to await developments."[8] Funk's claim has merit. The traveler is the only character present in every scene of the parable. He is a blank slate, not only

undescribed but silent throughout. The vicious details of his assault elicit our sympathy. Like him and with him, we wait to see who will come to help. If our preference is to identify not with him but with his rescuer, the story frustrates us. The rescuer turns out to be someone with whom it is impossible to identify: an enemy. The only character whose position we can finally claim is the one who *needs* a neighbor.

So we take our place by the wounded man to see who will come by. Sure enough, here comes someone, a priest. We are told that his appearance is "by chance" or "by coincidence" *(kata sugkurian)*. The implication of this expression is not clear. It could be a piece of storytelling flare, as in, "Now it just so happened." Hedrick reads it as a secular notice that no benevolent providence is at work for the wounded traveler, that his fate could go either way.[9] Nolland takes it to mean something like "as luck would have it," setting up an expectation that the presence of a priest on the road is good fortune for the victim.[10]

The priest's direction of travel is the same as the victim's had been; he is "going down," headed for Jericho, his back to Jerusalem. Presumably, he has finished a term of service at the temple and is headed home. Jericho was, in fact, the home of many priests. We are told that when he came to the place where the victim lay, "he saw him [and] passed by on the other side." Discussions abound concerning his reasons for giving wide berth to a half-dead man. Assuming that the victim appears to be dead, texts are adduced on the defilement incurred in touching a corpse (Lev 21:1-2, 11).[11] Counterarguments are made from the Talmud, which stipulate that an *abandoned* corpse must be attended to, even by a priest.[12] These discussions of priestly obligation provide interesting background, but their importance for hearing the parable is doubtful. The parable is silent on what laws the priest is keeping or breaking. They are irrelevant.

Down the same path now comes a Levite, a cleric of lesser rank. His response to the victim is described in exact parallel to the response of the priest: he "saw him [and] passed by on the other side."

With this development, something about the shape of the parable becomes clear. Like so many folktales, fairy tales, and jokes, it uses "the rule of three." The pattern is familiar. A situation is

repeated three times with three characters. The third provides resolution, and our expectation of the third is set up by the first two. There are clues in the parable that this age-old formula is in play. The parallel language—both men "saw him" and "passed by on the other side"—constitutes such a clue. So does the terseness of each account. The story's quick dispatch of these two seems almost dismissive (as they were dismissive), eager to show us another. We are not surprised. We don't expect the clergy to be of much use, and we don't expect Jesus to feature clergy as heroes. But most of all, *this is a tale*; we know there will be three, that the first two will get it wrong, and the third will get it right.

But notice the trap that has been set. In "the rule of three" the first two characters establish expectation for the third. If the first two figures differ from each other, we expect the third to represent another difference on the same continuum (an Irishman, an Englishman—an American). If the first two are of the same type, we expect the third figure to represent an opposite type (two lazy pigs—an industrious pig). This parable operates in the latter form. In the priest and the Levite, Jesus has dealt us two of a kind. Both are clergy; both are useless. We now lean forward, ready for a third character opposite in type and in response to the victim. We have been set up to expect, in other words, a helpful *layperson*. The opposite of clergy is laity or, in the terminology of first-century Palestine, an "Israelite."[13]

The figure that approaches instead is, incongruously, a Samaritan. His appearance is a riveting shock. The story's categories have been totally altered. The working category till now was religion: priest, Levite—layperson. Suddenly the category is geographical and ethnic. As someone has said, this is like telling a story that features a priest, a deacon, and a Frenchman.[14]

More jarring still, the figure is an enemy. The animosity between Samaritans and Jews was extreme. Samaritans, descendants of alien people who mixed with the remnants of Israel's northern tribes, had obstructed the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple (Ezra 4:2-5; Neh 2:19; 4:2-14) and aided the Syrians in their wars against the Jews in the second century B.C.E. Early in the first century C.E., Samaritans desecrated the Jerusalem temple at Passover with human bones.[15] Luke introduced Samaritans only forty-three verses earlier, reporting that when Jesus came to one of their villages, they turned him

away (9:52-53). They had reason for their hatred. The Jewish high priest in 128 B.C.E. had burned the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim to the ground. It was said that eating with a Samaritan was like eating swine. If a Samaritan brought an offering to the Jerusalem temple, it was to be rejected.[16] Most telling for our parable, some rabbis declared that accepting aid from a Samaritan delayed the redemption of Israel.[17]

The situation, then, is this: if you are the victim in the ditch, the one approaching you now is the last person on earth you want touching you. You would resist him if you could, but you can't since you are too broken to move.

Like the priest and the Levite, the Samaritan "saw him." But his way of seeing is different from theirs. We are told that he "came near him" and saw him. There is a bit of suspense built into the narrative here. We see the Samaritan's close approach before we know what he will do. Not until the final word of verse 33 do we learn, "he was moved with pity." This is the only word of anyone's internal motivation in the parable.

What follows is noticeably elaborate. All we really need to know is that the Samaritan cared for the victim, but the story gives him no less than twelve verbs of care: "he was moved with pity ... went ... bandaged ... having poured ... put him ... brought him ... took care of him ... took out two denarii ... gave them ... said ... Take care of him ... I will repay." Here is an instance of that vivid extravagance so typical in Jesus' parables. In this case it may serve more than one purpose. It certainly conveys the stunning abundance of love's initiatives. The spate of verbs gives the sense that compassion is a steady, generous consistency of deeds.

The Samaritan attends to all present needs (medicines, bandaging, transport to a safer place, care through the night), but his compassion embraces the *future* as well.[18] His words to the innkeeper are the only dialogue in the parable, a directive for ongoing care and a promise to return and pay "whatever more." His compassion, present and future, is costly. He expends his supplies, money, and time. He risks his life on a hostile road, and he risks a blank check on an innkeeper (the trade was notoriously dishonest).

The catalog of verbs may serve another purpose. Jesus will soon ask, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor?" We might resist granting the role to a sworn enemy. So, as Crossan

says, "before the question can be put, the hearer must see, feel, and hear the goodness of the Samaritan.... The function of 10:34-35 ... is so to involve the hearer in the activity that the objection is stifled at birth."[19]

The Frame Story Concluded (vv. 36-37)

Abruptly, we are pulled out of the parable on the hook of Jesus' question, which permits no answer but one, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor?" The lawyer cannot bring himself to say, "The Samaritan," but answers obliquely: "The one doing *[poiēsas]* mercy with him." Jesus answers like an echo, lobbing back the verb: "Go, and you do *[su poiei]* the same." We recall that their initial exchange was framed by this verb: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Do this, and you will live."

If this seems like a simple conclusion, it is not. Radical shifts have occurred. Most notable is a shift in what "neighbor" means. At the outset it meant the *object* of love: "love your neighbor/who is my neighbor?"[20] Jesus, revolutionizing the word, makes "neighbor" the *subject* of love. The search for the right recipient of our care is subverted. We can no longer go looking for neighbors; "neighbor" now means us—provided we "go and *do* likewise." But how can we? The figure Jesus commands us to emulate is repugnant to us. We cannot identify with him. In fact, the parable left us no one with whom to identify except the wounded one, a dying man who would resist his rescuer if he could, but is in no position to have any say.

The parable, an apparent reply to a question posed from a position of control, hurls us into a position of no control. We are set down into a horrid place of life-and-death need, spurned by the upright who find us abhorrent, then shocked by our enemy's extravagant kindness. Here the parable abandons us. Having stripped us of all patronizing questions about our love, it leaves us in a ditch to know our need for *any* neighbor; and it leaves us at an inn—healing, paid for, and compelled to go and do, in uncalculated ways, what the unlikeliest compassion has lavished on us.