PARADOX AND POSSIBILITY:

THE GOOD SAMARITAN PARABLE AS AN EXPLORATION OF VULNERABILITY

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The Good Samaritan parable found in Luke is ostensibly one that defines God's love in terms of helping a neighbor in need, but through a careful literary and contextual reading, one can also position this parable as an invitation to know God's love by *receiving* help from those we consider enemies. Because the concerns of this exploration center around being in a position of needing help, which is a form of vulnerability, voices (Middle Eastern, female, trauma survivor, Jewish) of those who have experience speaking from societal margins have been chosen to inform this study, in the understanding that issues of vulnerability and the nature of needing aid from others are more acknowledged (from necessity) in their worlds than those who operate primarily from the perspective of the dominant culture. In keeping with this, my own theological viewpoint of what it means to receive help from our so-called enemies and how this relates to the nature of God and love has been heavily influenced by Sharon Welch's *The Feminist Ethic of Risk*, which explores what it means to take the risk of showing weakness to those who might traditionally be considered enemies. Before exploring this more radical interpretation of a parable whose potential richness for exploration is often dismissed because of perceived overfamiliarity, a brief examination of the history of the criticism of this parable is in order to provide understanding as to how this new thesis provides an alternative reading that acknowledges but builds upon the old.[1]

Originally, scholars and church leaders viewed this parable as strictly allegorical with "the Good Samaritan representing him who came down to a wounded humanity with healing and deliverance, Christ himself."[2] In this reading, the shocking placement of the despised Samaritan in the story served to illustrate that "the true leader of the battered Israel is not the official leaders. . .but the unrecognized Son of Man who tends the scattered flock."[3] In time, the commonly held interpretation of the Good Samaritan story evolved away from an allegorical one, as it became recognized that the understanding of Jesus' parables was meant to be simple and clear, accessible to his audience of everyday listeners, not one that required specialized knowledge, as de-coding allegories does.[4] Consequently, for both scholars and the average reader of the past century or so, the thematic concern of this parable has centralized around the conception of neighborliness being shown by mercy, and it is this notion that I will attempt to build upon. For most modern readers, the Good Samaritan parable has held the meaning that "we must recognize our neighbor.

[1] Brian C. Stiller, *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 87.

[2] Birger Gerhardsson, *The Good Samaritan—The Good Shepherd?* (Copenhagen: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1958), 3.

[3] Ibid., 20.

[4] Tania Oldenhage, *Parables for Our Time: Rereading New Testament Scholarship After the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University, 2002), 41.

The neighbor is anyone who has need, no matter what his race, creed, color, or distance from us. We must give him what aid *we can*."[5] Likewise, the parable's overwhelming legacy has been "to invest the term 'Samaritan' with powerful overtones of compassion and loving concern for those in dire straits," and certainly this notion has entered the culture in a profound way.[6] While this insistent call to "love those human beings who are in need" is indisputably a powerful one, it ultimately fails to address a key response the ancient reader would have had to the parable's subversive play with narrative techniques.[7]

In attempting to access the less obvious message of the parable, it is vital that one understands the process of how the ancient audience would both anticipate and achieve identification with the characters in the parable. Undoubtedly, the composition of an audience informs the meaning gleaned from a narrative, for "reading a parable through the eyes of an educated female in an Anglo-American culture, for example, would likely elicit a different response than reading it through the consciousness of an educated male in the same social setting."[8] Scholars generally agree that Jesus specifically addressed the parable to Jewish listeners, and it is with this idea in mind that we look deeply at a contextual reading of the story.[9] The man who is robbed and beaten (and whose lack of name or other identifying characteristics can be viewed as a literary device to allow greater identification amongst readers) is most likely supposed to be regarded as a Jew, much as that original audience for the parable would have been, and thus, he would "unquestioningly represent universal humanity."[10] This assumed Jewish audience would identify to a degree and certainly heavily sympathize with this fellow Jew, an innocent victim of the kind of societal violence prevalent in those turbulent times. He ends up in a ditch, badly bruised and beaten, and "the Jewish audience is there with him in spirit and imagination, even thinking, 'It could have been one of us!'"[11] Yet, while there would indeed have been some identification with this man, his victimized state (and the relief that the audience would feel from the fact that they are *not* lying in that ditch as well) would suspend full audience identification. A modicum of

[5] Hillyer Hawthorne Straton, *A Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eermans Publishing, 1959), 114.

[6] J. Ian H. McDonald, "Alien Grace (Luke 10:30-36): The Parable of the Good Samaritan," in *Jesus and the Parables: Interpreting the Parables of Jesus Today*, ed. George V. Shillington, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 41.

[7] John Hargreaves, *A Guide to the Parables* (London: S. P. C. K., 1968) 72 John Hargreaves, *A Guide to the Parables* (London: S. P. C. K., 1968) 72.

[8] George V. Shillington, ed., *Jesus and the Parables: Interpreting the Parables of Jesus Today* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1997), 3.

[9] Frank Stern, *A Rabbi Looks at Jesus' Parables* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 218-19.

[10] Hillyer Hawthorne Straton, A Guide to the Parables of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Eermans Publishing, 1959), 111.

[11] McDonald, "Alien Grace," 44.

identification would be held back in waiting for the heroic figure that would undoubtedly appear to show compassion and provide the behavioral modeling that would be anticipated from a story told in this kind of religious context. The audience would eagerly wait for this embodied figure of goodness to enter the story and teach the lesson that they know is going to occur by the very nature of the parable, set as it is in a frame story answering the question "Who is my neighbor?" Indeed, the story initially fulfills narrative expectations: first, a priest going down the road sees the man but doesn't stop to help him, leaving the audience shaking their heads, for "if anyone should have been his neighbor, it was this man;" then, a Levite, who, like the priest, "represented the aristocracy of the time, they were the spiritual leaders," passes by without aiding the man in distress, positioning the audience of the time to feel superior and expect that the next person would not only aid the man, but also exemplify qualities of an average Jew--qualities that they could easily identify with.[12] Certainly, the story has thus far been quite deliberately set up to build this expectation; using a "three-fold pattern that is so common in popular storytelling, our attention is focused on the third traveler before he arrives, and this heightens the shock when we discover that he neither fits the pattern of cultural expectation nor the pattern of expectation created by the series."[13] Indeed, for the ancient audience, "now that the priest and Levite have come and gone, they expect a Jewish layman to arrive and solve the problem" for they expect "one of their own to show compassion."[14] [15] This anticipated figure of compassion and goodness is also where they expect their full level of identification to occur, as opposed to the nameless, featureless victim on the road for whom they feel sympathy but whose wretched state keeps them at a distance. While the Jewish audience and the man in the ditch are both awaiting the appearance of someone concerned for the beaten man's plight, the audience also knows that this savior, in exercising his compassion, will fulfill the law of God, and they have every reason to believe that he will be embodied as an everyday Jew much like themselves.[16] In verse 33, however, Luke abruptly shocks and surprises the ancient reader by finally having this heroic figure arrive, and, instead of a kind-hearted Jew, or a follower of Jesus--or even Jesus himself--it is a Samaritan who arrives on the scene. "The Samaritan was the despised heretic, the half-brother, the one who had just enough of the truth to be completely wrong," yet it is he who bandages the man's wounds, cares for him, and assures him a comfortable place

[12] Straton, *A Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, 112-113.

[13] Robert C. Tannehill, "Comments of the Articles of Daniel Patte and John Dominic Crossan," *Semeia* 2 (Atlanta: SBL Publications, 1974), 115.

[14] Stiller, *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns*, 84.

[15] McDonald, "Alien Grace," 44.

[16] Ibid., 44.

to rest.[17] In that revelatory moment, when the eagerly awaited heroic figure demanded by the structure of the narrative finally arrives, the shock from the disruption of narrative expectation is great for the ancient reader.

This abrupt undermining of narrative expectation elicits a keen reaction from the audience, and thus invests this short, seemingly predictable parable with unexpected depth and fodder for exploration of what neighborliness means. Certainly, while its unexpectedness shocks its audience in its violation of cultural expectations, it, perhaps more importantly, explodes "their conventional image of how grace is enacted." [18] This seemingly simple parable achieves this by its transgressive use of the time's cultural figures. Since parables are drawn from the common life of the society in which the teller lives, we must acknowledge that the prevailing thought would have been, as scholar Kenneth Bailey puts it in his attempt to evoke the voices of Middle Easterners, "Everyone knows God hates the Samaritans, so they certainly do not qualify as neighbors." [19] The Samaritan is the cultural and social enemy of the Jews, the embodiment of that which is unclean and unholy. Therefore, in that moment, we can discern that the audience would unequivocally reject the Samaritan as a figure of identification. At this point, the audience's identification with the victim, which was only partial before, becomes total, the shock from the Samaritan's appearance leading the audience to identify with the equally shocked and bruised victim lying in the road where "the view from the ditch is that of a hated Samaritan face looming above."[20] In this shift, we see the hidden brilliance of this parable, for up to this point, it has induced "the hearers into a narrative world with which they readily identify. It is precisely because they are brought to such a degree of engagement with it that the sudden twist of the plot has such dramatic force."[21] To put this into a context that has meaning for us today, one could suggest "the image of a Samaritan as a model of profound and loving compassion was as astonishing to Jews then as a Nazi becoming the hero of a story today."[22] Substituting "Nazi" for "Samaritan" is a creative (if slightly over-the-top) leap that allows

[17] Straton, *A Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, 111.

[18] Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998), 109. Shillington, *Jesus and the Parables,* 2.

[19] Ibid.*,* 2. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 288.

[20] McDonald, "Alien Grace," 44.

[21] Ibid., 44.

[22] Stern, *A Rabbi Looks at Jesus' Parables*, 221.

modern readers to emotionally access the notion that "for Jews, the story would be wrenching—forcing them. . .to revise their thinking about Samaritans."[23]

Therefore, the presence of the Samaritan is a deliberate one, designed by its placement to help the Jewish audience "overcome their antipathy to Samaritans and others traditionally despised in Jewish society, and to broaden their understandings of the biblical commandment 'Love your neighbor.'"[24] The inclusion of this controversial figure has the distinct purpose of shaking people out of the comfortable particularities of their faith, forcing them to recognize that loving their neighbor is the foremost factor in loving God.[25] In speaking to an African audience, Albert Schweitzer suggested that the meaning of the parable was that "whenever you have the desire to say or to think these words, 'This one is not my brother,' this story will gnaw into your heart like a worm, so that you may know. . .all the peoples of the earth, whether they be white or black: that they are all brothers."[26] While Schweitzer's audience may not have been white westerners, his interpretation was very much in line with that of twentieth century western critics, who generally suggested that the parable's strength was in its call to not "show love only to those who belong to our own family or clan or town or nation or race. . .We also think of those who show love across those divisions."[27]

As a result of this richer understanding of the contextual and literary ramifications of the Samaritan's key placement in the narrative, possibilities abound for finding new meaning of what it means to be a neighbor within this parable, particularly in light of the fact that contemporary scholars champion the power of the parable "as a way of framing provocative thought and vision; the narrative parable is distinctive, and merits serious investigation and lively experimentation."[28] In her innovative book *Parables for Our Time: Rereading New Testament Scholarship After the Holocaust,* Tania Oldenhage acknowledges that the parables of Jesus can be viewed from a postmodernist perspective that highlights "the excitement of shifting grounds over and against the boredom and dullness of reified norms and notions."[29] Thus, while some critics over the years have hypothesized that Luke added the character of

[23] Ibid., 218.

[24] Ibid., 218-19.

[25] Stiller, *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns*, 87.

[26] Albert Schweitzer, *The African Sermons* (New York: Syracuse University, 2003), 126.

[27] Hargreaves, *A Guide to the Parables*, 72.

[28] Shillington, *Jesus and the Parables,* 2.

[29] Oldenhage, *Parables for Our Time,* 79.

the Samaritan to the story because Jesus could not have spoken about an enemy of the Jewish people in such an affirming way, it seems more likely that the Samaritan has always been a part of this parable, for much of its power lies in its transgressive quality (very much in keeping with Jesus' style of teaching), one that rips apart social norms and audience expectation, and forces the audience to intellectually and emotionally occupy an uncomfortable space.[30] The complete lack of identification the readers would have felt with the Samaritan is clear, and while "it is true that the usual trio would be priest, Levite, Israelite, the substitution of a Samaritan is a master-stroke.'[31] Certainly, other storytelling options were available to the author(s) of the parable. For instance, "the story could have been located in Samaria with a good Jew rescuing a wounded Samaritan. Instead, it is a hated Samaritan who (presumably) rescues a wounded Jew."[32] Jesus' parables push the boundaries of the traditional Jewish form of parables, and this breaking of conventional rules (such as the inclusion of the Samaritan) is where the meat of the parables' meaning often comes from.[33] Instead of the parable only reflecting the ad nauseum use of the Samaritan as a metaphor for being kind or good, the disruption of narrative expectations evokes even greater ideas, such as the concept that loving God and loving one's neighbor are inseparably connected.[34] In the Good Samaritan story, we see that the transgressive presence of the Samaritan himself shatters the expected twist of the parable formula "at the service of a disclosure of new meaning, a new view of reality" that challenges conventional meaning and breaks wide open complacent ideas of kindness or helping those in need.[35] In other words, the parable becomes not a metaphor but a paradox, asking what neighborliness is, and offering multiple, uneasily co-existing answers that challenge the prioritization of belief and identity in favor of action. Thus, the story suggests that what is of ultimate concern is what one does, not what one believes.

Clearly then, a contextual examination reveals the abrupt shift in identification to be a deliberate one that forces the audience of the time to envision itself being helped by a person considered an enemy, a consideration that engenders a confusion of audience responses. From a literary standpoint, the parable is very aware of this choice and the narrative construction, even padding the story with a detailed cataloguing of the Samaritan's actions in order to

[30] Young, *The Parables,* 116.
[31] Straton, *A Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, 111.
[32] Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes,* 297.
[33] Oldenhage, *Parables for Our Time,*122.
[34] Stiller, *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns*, 87.
[35] Oldenhage, *Parables for Our Time,* 77.

allow the "audience a longer narration to absorb and put together the unexpected appearance and action of the Samaritan; a hearer receives a chance to reorder the order in light of this change in order."[36] This scramble to "reorder the order in light of this change in order" is a paradoxical one, in that while the audience may initially walk away feeling they have grasped the meaning of the parable, other possibilities will likely surface in their minds as they consider its seemingly contradictory elements over time. Thus, this parable acts much in the way that Oldenhage defines as the singularity of Jesus' parables, which utilize "the formal concept of paradox: the subversion of previously held opposites."[37] At last, then, we come to the crux of the matter. In imagining the man lying in the ditch, postmodernist critic Brian C. Stiller asks us:

> What would have gone through his mind watching a Samaritan bending over him, cleansing his wounds and picking him up, setting him on his donkey? What would have been in his thoughts as he was carried into the nearest village, possibly Jericho, in sight of his colleagues, being cared for by someone from the most despised of communities?[38]

Here is where the paradoxical nature of this parable becomes most evident. While we (and ancient audiences), upon initially encountering the parable, may have theorized that its thematic concern was that of being a good neighbor to someone in distress, the truth is that the lack of identification with the Samaritan means that the audience identifies with the victim, not the savior. How then does it feel to discover in one's enemy "the shock of the embodiment of compassion?"[39] Even non-Jewish audiences have found themselves identifying in this way, as A. J. Jacobs' discovered when he asked an actual Samaritan who he identified with in the story and received the response that it was the victim; for him, identification with the victim was assumed to be Jesus' intention because Jesus, above all people, understood what it was like to be a victim.[40] Certainly, the audience's identification with the victim purports the idea that we ourselves may someday need the Samaritan's neighbor-love, but paradoxically, the parable does not

[36] Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989) pg. 199.

[37] Oldenhage, *Parables for Our Time,* 76.

[38] Stiller, *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns*, 84.

[39] Vernon K. Robbins, "The Sensory-Aesthetic Texture of the Compassionate Samaritan Parable in Luke 10," in *Literary Encounters with the Reign of God*, ed. Sharon H. Ringe and H. C. Paul Kim (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 263.

[40] A. J. Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 219.

neatly dictate what it takes to graciously accept that love.[41] Likewise, it takes vulnerability to allow ourselves to be helped by those we consider enemies, but conversely, there is present a kind of strength that stems from the love required in allowing ourselves to be vulnerable to another. Hence, the ancient audience and we reading the parable contextually must make that leap to understand how humans, in moments of need, can be paradoxically vulnerable and strong enough to allow an enemy to become a friend.[42] The question then raised by the parable is how does that feel, receiving compassionate help from someone that we do not consider of value and worth? How does it feel to have our worst enemy reach out a hand in love and comfort? By evoking these perhaps definitively unanswerable questions, the parable transcends being merely a gentle call to neighborliness, touching instead on more delicate issues of fragility, vulnerability, and accepting help from those whom we despise. In short then, the neighborliness concept in this parable can be viewed as not solely a call to give help to those in need, but also as a fervent invitation (with all its messy repercussions) to *receive* help from those who don't (seemingly) share our values, way of life, or other factors that make it easy to be in community together.

Deep social and community concerns beyond simple neighborliness are also hinted at by the use of the framing device initiated by a question asked by someone revealed to be an expert in the law. The lawyer's initial query in verse 29 is "who is my neighbor?" which has naturally led many contemporary casual readers to assume the story was primarily about being helpful to those in need. Likewise, at the end of the parable, in verse 37, the lawyer says that the Samaritan, due to the mercy he showed, is the true neighbor in the parable. Yet, keeping in mind the deliberately orchestrated shift in identification, and the idea that Jesus "does not answer the man's questions but raises other questions," we see that Jesus' telling of this parable is actually a call to the lawyer to "expand his understanding of what faithfulness requires of him."[43] Jesus' answering of questions with questions (a device that supports the paradoxical nature of my interpretation) has the effect of changing "the focus from 'Who is my neighbor?' (10:29) to 'How does a person become a neighbor?' (10:36)."[44] Within the new framing of this question, we see room for the shift in identification and the exploration of what it means to be allow oneself to be helped by an enemy. The neighbor in the story is defined as "the one who showed mercy," and while the Samaritan certainly

[41] Dennis E. Smith and Michael E. Williams, ed, *The Parables of Jesus* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 72.
[42] Young, *The Parables,*105.
[43] Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes,* 297.
[44] Robbins, "The Sensory-Aesthetic Texture of the Compassionate Samaritan Parable in Luke 10," 256-7.

showed mercy, did the wounded man not also show mercy (kindness toward an enemy) in letting the Samaritan care for him?[45] Theologian Sharon Welch suggests that "what matters most is that mercy should be done: it is less important who does it," which positions both the Samaritan and the victim as heroic figures in the story.[46] For some critics, the parable thus becomes not just about helping others, but also touches upon our collective suffering as a human family, with no discernible "difference between sufferer and helper."[47] For the parable's audience, forced to identify fully with the victim once the Samaritan appears on the scene, the understanding becomes that humans "show our love also by the way in which we receive [love]," and that in order to receive aid and comfort from others, we must love them first, as an apology, for instance, is without full impact if we withhold our love from the person offering the apology.[48] Therefore, being a neighbor isn't marked solely by our willingness to help others; it is also defined by whether we, as victim or helper, "act toward our fellow men with love."[49] For Welch, "the terms *holy* and *divine* denote a quality of being within a process of healing relationship," and we see a healing relationship on display in the Good Samaritan parable.[50] Yet, for those who would suggest that the healing is actively performed solely on the part of the Samaritan, we remember Welch's statement that "the love that heals is far from the spirit of self-sacrifice," and recognize that sometimes healing is manifested in how we *receive* love, not how we give it.[51] Contemporary critic J. Ian H. McDonald suggests that this parable's unexpected twist speaks to the idea of life giving compassion, and that past critics of the parable tended to overlook the idea that "to receive compassion, even through an alien agent, moves one to become compassionate. In so far as there is an exemplary aspect, it is that of *imitatio dei*: one must imitate the divine action."[52] In other words, to accept compassion when one is vulnerable is to pave the way for one to become more compassionate, and thus, more in keeping with the spirit of God's love, or, as Welch puts it, "to work with others is not to lose oneself, but first and foremost, it is to find a larger self."[53] Hence,

[45] Young, *The Parables,* 117.

[46] Hargreaves, *A Guide to the Parables*, 74.

[47] Ibid., 72-3.

[48] Ibid., 74.

[49] Stern, *A Rabbi Looks at Jesus' Parables*, 219.

[50] Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 178.

[51] Ibid., 161.

[52] McDonald, "Alien Grace," 45.

[53] Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 162.

these questions about neighborliness in the opening and closing with the lawyer are critical in ultimately conveying that "to love God is expressed in loving others, and in loving others one comes to love God."[54]

With this idea in mind, it is no wonder that some critics have theorized that the part of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says, "Love your enemies" (Matt 5:43-44) was originally part of the Good Samaritan parable itself.[55] Whether that is true or not, it is intriguing to consider in light of my suggestion that the parable speaks not just to helping others but also to broader issues of vulnerability and receiving love from others. The victim's position in the parable and our identification with him speaks to Welch's notion of letting go of control, something difficult to do in a culture shaped by an ethic of control.[56] Yet, we can trade that ethic of control for an ethic of risk, as the victim in the Good Samaritan parable does when he allows his enemy to help him. In allowing ourselves to be vulnerable enough to accept help, just as that universally human figure of the victim in the Good Samaritan parable invites us to do, we can find new ways to "live creatively, responsibly, and compassionately in the present."[57] This concept resonates with me, a twenty-first century Unitarian Universalist, for I believe that we can find God when we look where there is weakness and vulnerability because that is where, paradoxically, the most powerful moments of our existence take place. Only by being fully engaged with the world and both its joy and pain can we come into an authentic relationship with the divine, and in my reading of it, the Good Samaritan parable offers us an invitation to be both helper and helped, savior and saved.

[54] Stiller, *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns*, 87.

[55] Young, *The Parables,* 104.

[56] Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 25.

[57] Ibid., 37.

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