

When the milk of human kindness curdles, it leaves a bad taste; Jesus gives us a sample in what we call the parable of “the Good Samaritan.”

We call Jesus’ story that; Jesus didn’t; the title is our interpretation of it, and like any interpretation, it can lead us astray. We speak of “The Good Samaritan” and by implication condemn the Priest and the Levite as bad. In so doing, we obscure the scandal of Jesus’ story; Jesus takes conventional characters – the quintessential good guys – the Priest and the Levite, and the consummate bad guy – the Samaritan and turns their roles upside down. Just when we think we know the story, Jesus turns the tables; the bad guy is the good guy, and the good guys are not so good, they “pass by on the other side.”

This turning of the tables brings to mind a classic comedy staple: “A priest, a rabbi, and a minister walk into a bar ... you’d think one of them would have noticed.”

A rabbi, a minister, and a priest are playing poker when the police raid the game. Addressing the priest, the lead officer asks: “Father Murphy, were you gambling?” Turning his eyes to heaven, the priest whispers, “Lord, forgive me for what I am about to do.” To the police officer, he then says, “No, officer, I was not gambling.” The officer then asks the minister: “Pastor Johnson, were you gambling?” Again, after an appeal to heaven, the minister replies, “No, officer, I was not gambling.” Turning to the rabbi, the officer again asks: “Rabbi Goldstein, were you gambling?” Shrugging his shoulders, the rabbi replies: “With whom?”<sup>1</sup>

The Priest and the Levite were good guys; that’s the scandal in this parody. They don’t do anything wrong; in fact, doing what is right, keeping themselves pure for their arrival in Jerusalem, resulted in their breaking the two great commandments that sum up all of Scripture; *Luke 10:27 (NRSV)* “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.*”

The milk of human kindness curdled when they saw the man in need and passed by on the other side. This is a side of sin that is easy to overlook; when we confess, we think about what we’ve done (in and of itself this can take a while), but the Priest and the Levite sinned in what they did not do. They saw the situation; they recognized the need; and they didn’t do anything about it.

We can’t do everything, but we can do something. In particular, we can resist the temptation to “pass by on the other side.” We can stand with people in their pain; we can add our voices to their voice until our cries grow so loud that they must be heard.

It’s easy to think that people’s problems are their fault; there is often some truth to this line of thinking. The man in the parable went down from Jerusalem to Jericho alone; anyone with an iota of sense knew that was a bad idea! The Roman General Pompey dispatched soldiers to try to bring the bandits under control – and failed. Walking alone down that road was asking for trouble. This may be

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<sup>1</sup> <http://ask.metafilter.com/37733/Finish-this-joke-A-Rabbi-a-Priest-and-a-Minister-Walk-Into-a-Bar>  
Colossians 1:1-14; Psalm 82:1-8; Luke 10:25-37

why the Priest and Levite are also in such a hurry. The man made a mistake; he paid a high price. That's too bad, but that's life; we sleep in the beds we make. How often do we read about someone being shot at 10<sup>th</sup> and Buttonwood at 2 AM and think to ourselves, “Well what were they doing at 10<sup>th</sup> and Buttonwood at 2 AM?”

It's easy to think that people's problems are their fault; this gives us permission to do nothing; we can “pass by on the other side” as free as a bird; but the problem of sin is deeper and broader than that. We sin in what we do. We sin in what we don't do. And we sin in the institutions and systems of our society. We sin personally; we sin corporately.

Consider the system that the Samaritan puts into motion on the man's behalf; the health care system. The Samaritan provides immediate first aid. Then he transports the man to an inn where he pays for two weeks of health care with the promise that if the man needs more, he will pay for it when he returns.

“Who is my neighbor?” My neighbor is the one in need of quality healthcare that they can afford. My neighbor needs to be able to take the medications they need and eat a reasonable diet. My neighbor needs to know that they can access doctors and specialists without crippling their loved ones with debts they can never pay. My neighbor needs a system they can trust when they are at their most vulnerable rather than an institution they fear will exploit their need for financial gain and whitewash the crime with Explanations of Benefits that conceal and confuse.

Does my neighbor contribute to their own ill health? Do we make the sick beds we find ourselves lying in? Absolutely. We're not innocent in this. We are sinners, but to limit the sin that makes us sick to what we did or didn't do artificially simplifies the situation. We need to make healthier choices, and we need a health care system that serves us all well.

Our neighbor is lying by the side of the road. What are we going to do about it? Will we help him in his hour of need? Will we stand by his side and add our voice to his until the system changes; recognizing that they may take a while and may cost us dearly? Or will we keep our distance and justify ourselves by saying, “They made their bed. Now lie in it?”

"All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." (Edmund Burke)

Sin isn't simple. Sin is what we do. Sin is what we don't do. And sin is how the systems and institutions we create function and dysfunction. Love God. Love your neighbor. God forbid that the milk of human kindness curdles in us when we see our neighbor in need and choose to pass by on the other side! Amen.