

who is my neighbor?

Who is My Neighbor? The Good Samaritan Then and Today

In order to discern God's timeless revelation to us in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, we must reflect on our often unconscious understanding of who our neighbors are, and expose that understanding to the power of the parable.

GOD'S REVELATION THROUGH GRACE

Our Christian faith is a revealed faith. The one God of history is made known to us, or revealed to us, through grace. In grace we experience ourselves as loved by God. Grace is essential to human nature – we say it is what makes us fully human. It is grace that empowers us to love others.

GOD'S REVELATION THROUGH HISTORY

God is also revealed to us through history. Salvation history is a record of the saving acts of God. The Jews of the Old Testament understood history in terms of a covenant with God: "I am your God and you will be my people . . . obey the law and be rewarded: disobey the law and you will suffer." Central to that law was the importance of caring for the widow, orphan and the stranger. History was a record of Israel's fidelity and infidelity to the law. It revealed the truth of the covenant. The Jesus of history changed our concept of history itself. The parables of Jesus pointed out the layers of context in our history. They showed how the Wisdom of God is revealed in the surprises of history and that this wisdom, although now revealed, was often hidden from human understanding.

GOD'S REVELATION THROUGH SCRIPTURE

Finally, God is revealed to us through Scripture. Sacred Scripture contains stories from early Jewish culture as well as the cultures of Israel's neighbors. It contains accounts of historical events, prophecies and the wisdom of ancient times. It also contains the stories of the early Christian communities. These stories, histories and

wisdom were recorded by human beings bound, like us, to certain cultural standards. Where is the hand of God in such a compilation?

The power of Scripture does not lie in the physical presence of the books, nor does it lie in the literal nature of the words recorded. Rather, the power of Scripture lies in its meaning, which is revealed to us by God. Through God's grace and guided by the Church, we are able to discern God's revelation in Scripture by reading "the *world behind the text*," or Scripture's historical context, in conjunction with "the *world in front of the text*," or our present context. By reflecting on the way that God has spoken through Scripture in the past and continues to speak through it today, we are better able to hear God's biblical call to action for tomorrow.

THE WORLD "IN FRONT OF" THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Think about your experience when reading a book or watching a movie. After a long day at work, you relish the opportunity to return home, curl up in your easy chair with a new novel or movie and enter into the world of the story that has been created for you.

The world of a particular story often looks different to different people. This is due to the fact that your experience of the world of the story is shaped, in part, by your own experience. If you are a Native American reading a novel about the Little Big Horn, you will experience the character of Custer differently than a person whose ancestors settled in the West. A black man reads Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* in a different light than a black woman. Both experience Walker's created world differently than a white man or woman.

We call these different experiences that we bring to the reading of a novel, the "*world in front of the text*." The world in front of the text is that accumulation of personal, cultural and historical experiences that guides our interpretation of the

text's meaning. The same process is at play when we read the revealed word of God in Sacred Scripture.

We need to acknowledge the *world in front of* the text and appreciate the vitality it provides our reading of Scripture, but it cannot be our only guide for interpretation. The meaning of Scripture is partially revealed to us through our own experience, but this revelation is incomplete. To be satisfied with this level of understanding would be to reduce Scripture to our own purposes. We must weave the “world in front of the text” with the “world behind the text” in order to more clearly discern the tapestry of God’s revelation.

THE WORLD “BEHIND” THE GOOD SAMARITAN

The story of the Good Samaritan may be familiar, but in order to understand the full impact of this parable, we must first understand the history of Jewish-Samaritan relations. In this parable as well as in other Gospel stories such as the story of Jesus and the Samaritan Woman, we can observe the tense relationship that existed between Jews and Samaritans. This tension may go back as far as 722 B.C.E. when the Assyrians invaded, conquered, and intermarried with the Jews who were living in Samaria. Due to this intermarriage and to the Samaritans’ practice of worshipping on Mount Gerizim instead of in Jerusalem, the Samaritans came to be viewed as an entirely different ethnic group from the Jews in Judea, though both descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. By the time of Jesus, Samaritans and Jews no longer considered themselves to be neighbors, let alone related through a common ancestry.¹¹

Given this tense relationship between Jews and Samaritans at the time of Jesus, the Parable of the Good Samaritan would have been quite shocking to its first listeners. No one would have expected Jesus to answer the Jewish scholar’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” with the example of a Samaritan. This shocking parable radically expands the traditional definition of “neighbor.” A neighbor is not simply the person

who lives next door nor is it merely someone in our extended family or community. Whatever social categories we may have that define "neighbor" are thwarted by the needs of all the people we encounter. In this way, anyone in need is our neighbor. Jesus' parable is, in a sense, telling us, "You do not have a neighbor. You make yourself someone's neighbor."

Jesus' parable is also shocking because it forces us to see the dignity and ability of "the other." Like the outsiders of any society, the Samaritans were largely written off by the dominant Jewish community, who saw the Samaritans' worship practices and lifestyle as inferior. This label of "inferiority" is utterly destroyed in Jesus' parable. The Samaritan in the story forces all those listening to recognize his ability to enact transformative love towards his Jewish neighbor. The Samaritan is a human with dignity and therefore, is not to be written off.

THE WORLD "IN FRONT" OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

The *world behind* the Parable of the Good Samaritan provides a deep and rich understanding of Jesus' transformative message to his early followers. However, it is essential that we bring the insight we have gleaned from the historical context to bear on *the world in front of* the text, or our twenty-first century context.

Just as Jesus' first-century audience had preconceived notions about who their neighbors were, we, too, have culturally-constructed definitions of "neighbor." We have expectations about what our neighbor looks like. If the people moving into our community do not belong to our category of neighbor, we say that the community is "changing." In order to discern God's timeless revelation to us in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, we must reflect on this often unconscious understanding of who our neighbors are, and expose that understanding to the power of the parable. Jesus' parable radically expanded the first-century notion of a neighbor and it should do the same for us today. Bringing our own personal and social categories to the

parables allows us to be challenged and shaped by these stories, just as Jesus' listeners were challenged and shaped by his original telling.

We not only need to reflect on our preconceived definitions of “neighbor,” but we must also consider our often unconscious characterizations of those living in the margins of our community. Specifically, we must consider whether there are groups of people whose dignity and ability we fail to recognize. Are there communities whom we feel have forfeited their dignity and so can be appropriately “written off?”

Reflecting on both the historical and modern assumptions that are embedded in our reading of Scripture is essential to gaining a deeper understanding of Scripture’s meaning in the past and in the present. Consideration of these contexts is not enough, though. We must go further and ask how, in light of the text’s historical and modern contexts, Scripture is calling us to action.

THE SCRIPTURAL CALL TO ACTION

We’ve begun to see how the *world behind* the Parable of the Good Samaritan can be woven with the *world in front of* it in order to facilitate the discernment of God’s revelation to us today. It is essential not only to acknowledge the bearings of the historical and modern contexts on Scripture, but we must also ask how the weaving of these two worlds calls us to action. In other words, we must not only reflect on Scripture’s message yesterday and today, but we must go further and consider the action to which God is calling us for tomorrow.

In order to better discern the Parable of the Good Samaritan’s call to action, take a few moments and prayerfully consider the answers to the following reflection questions:

“Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29)

- Invitation. If someone is very passionate, enthusiastic or interested, invite him or her to get involved in a more concrete way—for example, ask if he or she would be willing to take part in a larger meeting with other people also concerned about these same issues.
- How do I define neighbor? How does my community define it? My country?
- How is Jesus challenging his audience to expand their definition of neighbor?
- How is he challenging me to me to expand my own definitions?
- Recall the “un-neighborly” relationship between Jews and Samaritans at the time of Jesus. Think about an experience of “un-neighborly” relationships you may have.
- Call to mind concrete examples of people or groups of people who you/your community/your country do not consider neighbors.
 - What would it look like to be a neighbor to those individuals or groups of people?

“You shall...love your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27)

- Recall how the Parable of the Good Samaritan pushes its audience to recognize the dignity and gift of the marginalized Samaritan.
- Do I/my community/my country uphold the dignity and gift of all people?
- How does my community treat those on the margins of society: immigrants, refugees, those living in poverty, those with disabilities, etc.? Are they treated as people with dignity and gift?
- What would it look like to love them as neighbors? What would it look like to recognize their dignity? Call to mind some concrete ideas.

CONCLUSION

By reflecting on the worlds behind and in front of Scripture and guided by the Church and God’s grace we are better able to discern God’s revelation to us today. It is not enough to discern and reflect on this revelation, however. Such discernment and reflection help us to hear God’s call in Scripture, but we must take the final step and carry out that call in our own lives and communities.

[1] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, The Gospel According to Luke (I-IX), (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 829.

This content is excerpted from the Journey to Justice program, a day-long retreat developed by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. [JustFaith Ministries](#) uses this retreat to help their program participants encounter persons living in poverty, understand the root causes of poverty, and reflect on how the Gospel challenges us to respond.