
Privilege, Race, and the Good Samaritan

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Scripture

Psalm 82

God takes his stand in the council of heaven;
he gives judgment in the midst of the gods:
"How long will you judge unjustly,
and show favor to the wicked?
Save the weak and the orphan;
defend the humble and needy;
Rescue the weak and the poor;
deliver them from the power of the wicked.
They do not know, neither do they understand;
they go about in darkness;
all the foundations of the earth are shaken.
Now I say to you, 'You are gods,
and all of you children of the Most High;
Nevertheless, you shall die like mortals,
and fall like any prince."
Arise, O God, and rule the earth,
for you shall take all nations for your own.

Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He

answered, "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." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "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.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Sermon

This past March, I needed to do some major brake repair on my car. I scheduled the repair work at a great place in El Cerrito that I had used before and drove there during my lunch hour. On my, driving through Albany, I pulled up to a stop sign. An Albany police vehicle pulled up to the same stop sign to my right just as I had come to a stop. I proceeded to turn left, and the cop continued forward behind me. As I made the next right, one block from the auto repair shop, the police officer turned on his lights and I pulled over.

My mind went down a quick check-list: came to a complete stop, twice; used my turn signals, twice; going under the speed limit. "Great," I thought, "I wasn't doing anything. Why on earth is he pulling me over?" I retrieved my wallet, rolled down my window, and waited for the patrolman to walk up to my car. He approached with a smile, asked for my license, registration, and proof of insurance. I handed them to him, and realized my insurance was out of date. "No worries," I thought, "I have it on my phone." I reached into my pocket, pulled out my phone, and loaded my most current insurance certificate on my insurance company's app, which sparked a conversation between me and the cop about the marvels of modern technology.

He then informed me that the reason he pulled me over was I had a brake light out and my front windows were tinted. I laughed, explained I got the car when I lived in Texas, and didn't know that front window tinting was illegal in California. I promised I'd definitely get it taken care of, and noted the irony of him pulling me over for a brake light moments before I would turn into the auto shop for brake repair. He smiled at that, said he'd be right back, and stepped back to his cruiser. Within 30 seconds, he returned to me with nothing more than the license and paperwork I had given him in his hand, and said, "Well, Mr. Capps, go ahead and get both those things fixed, and have a wonderful afternoon!" A verbal warning.

"Thanks so much," I said, then started my car and pulled away.

I drove the few hundred yards to the entrance of the repair shop when a wave of nausea washed over me. In that moment, the intersection of my experience with that police officer collided head on with the deep, visceral realization that my pleasant interaction likely occurred only because of the color of my skin, the privilege of being a white male.

This week, as the horror of the news came splashing across our screens from Baton Rouge and Saint Paul, culminating in the atrocity in Dallas, that experience of mine replayed over and over and over in my head. Scheduled to preach this weekend, I knew I had to speak to the realities of this week, yet as I worked towards this sermon, tossing out multiple drafts at each death, I struggled with the real concern of whether I, as a white man, even have the right to speak to the horrors of the systemic racism in our culture.

I have never once had to worry about what would happen to me if I get pulled over by the police. I am not Philando Castille. I can easily reach for my wallet or phone without the real fear that simply complying with a police officer's request would end in my summary execution. I have never once had to worry what my child wears out in public. I am not Sybrina Fulton, the mother of Treyvon Martin. My future child can walk down the street wearing a hoodie without fear that a proverbial "good guy with a gun" would summarily decide my child was a lurking menace and sentence him to death. I have never once been concerned that a ride home on public transportation would be my last ride. I am not Oscar Grant. I can ride the BART home from celebrating with friends, unconcerned that an—at best—careless police officer would end my life after confusing his side arm with a Taser.

But here I am, nonetheless, speaking to you, lamenting with you, and I beg your patience as I work through the questionable legitimacy of preaching with any authority from my place of white privilege.

When injustice rears its cancerous head, one of the best places to seek refuge is in the Psalms. The myth and metaphor of the 82nd Psalm seems perversely apt this week as it

converges with our lament. In it, God declares to the other gods of the council in the cosmos, “How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?” For monotheists, references to other gods may be confusing. But this council need not be read literally as though God is speaking to other gods: they are instead for us, today, that which we hold up as gods. Rules for rules sake, authority for authority sake, our power and privilege, which keeps some of us comfortable while separating us from, and preventing us from, loving our neighbor.

Our laws, our rules, our leaders fail us when they do not give justice to the weak and the orphan, when they fail to maintain the rights of the lowly and the destitute, when they ignore the weak and the needy: in today's understanding, these structures of power fail us when they further shield the privileged and bring injury to the marginalized.

When Barack Obama was elected president nearly 8 years ago, the phrase “post-racial America” was batted around by the white talking heads on TV like some self-congratulatory promotion. “Great job electing a black man! We don't need to worry anymore about race in America,” they seemed to say. “Racism is dead! We have finally moved on from the horrors of Jim Crow!”

We are obsessed in white America with the iconography of racism: Bull Connor blasting peaceful protestors with fire hoses; George Wallace adamantly declaring from the steps of the Alabama capitol, “. . . segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever;” the sweetness and innocence of six-year-old Ruby Bridges as she is escorted into school by US Marshals—an image so potent that Norman Rockwell captured it on canvas; the grainy black and white photos of young men of color, whose names are now lost to history, hanging from trees as the demonic smiles of white men, women, and children crowd 'round.

But those icons of racism are only the grotesque surface of the systemic racism that continues to permeate our society. In reality, declaring us to be a “post-racial society” is deeply racist itself. It ignores the struggles that our marginalized neighbors face on a daily basis: the micro-aggression of the white woman walking down the street who unconsciously pulls in her purse tightly as she passes a young black man, the well-intentioned yet immensely racist “compliment” of a white male in a board room telling his black female colleague she is very “articulate.” As we have witnessed all too clearly this past week, systemic racism is still alive and well in our culture, and it is deadly.

If we are to bring about the Kin(g)dom of God, we must do more than simply recognize ourselves in our neighbors. To destroy the cancer of racism, we must recognize God in them.

The story of the Good Samaritan is one of those stories so central to the Christian identity that it permeates more than just our Christian mythos. In fact, we have honored this parable by enshrining it in our very civil law as a method of protecting from litigious individuals those who act in good faith to render aid to people in need: the Good Samaritan Law, as it is known. But as with other beloved parables, in turning the story into a cliché, we have lost the deeper meanings, meanings that are critical, even prescient in recent days.

Law in the ancient Middle East was not just civil law as we know law in our country today. There was no separation of Church and State. Civil law was intimately intertwined with religious law. So, the lawyer that the author of Luke describes would have been quite familiar with Jewish sacred laws. He would have known of the Holiness codes, of the need to maintain ritual cleanliness. He would have recognized that touching what may have been a corpse would have rendered a priest or a Levite, a priest's assistant, unclean. He would have recognized the demands of keeping the anointed tribes of Israel separate from the Gentiles: that the law cast out the Samaritans as unworthy enemies.

And yet, there is Jesus, yet again, turing the world on its head. The parable is not a story warning against clericalism, as one might expect beginning with its characters of a priest and a Levite. It is a warning against blindly following the law when that law injures your neighbor. It condemns keeping to rules for the sake of rules, it overturns authority structures built for the sake of authority.

The one in whom Christ presented compassion is the one whom the listeners would treat as suspect, the one whom they were trained to despise. And yet, faced with the absolute facts before him, the lawyer's own response to Jesus's test, asking who was the neighbor, betrays the lawyer's continued bigotry: "the one who shows mercy," he said. He cannot even bring himself to say the word "Samaritan."

Friends, I do not have answers for you today, only more questions. Far more intelligent women and men than I have wrestled with the systemic racism in our society, and yet it remains a blight we face. Instead, I stand here, with you, asking forgiveness for the ways in which I have failed to challenge the racism in our culture. I stand here, with you, to ask forgiveness for the ways in which we as society have remained complacent in the face of oppression. And I'm here to leave you with hope.

So, lets part today with an updated version of the Good Samaritan story:

A man was going down the Embarcadero in the city late one evening, and was attacked by a group of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a Christian was going down that road; and when he saw him, assuming he

was a drunken homeless man, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a local city council member, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a black Muslim headed to a late dinner during the fast of Ramadan came near him; and when she saw him, she was moved with pity. She went to him and called 911. When the ambulance arrived, she jumped in with him as the paramedics rushed him to the hospital. The doctors raced him into trauma surgery and saved him. The next day she took out her credit card and said to the staff, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend."

Friends, the words of the Good Samaritan story are not just rhetoric. They are not banal. They are not cliché. They remind us of our own internal bigotries and challenge us to move past them. They are the essence of compassion, the essence of God's Kin(g)dom. They are, in fact, salvation.