



# The New England Church Pulpit

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SECOND GUESSING

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I begin with the reading from Islam:

*A man once asked the Prophet what was the best thing in Islam, and the latter replied, "It is to feed the hungry and to give the greeting of peace both to those one knows and to those one does not know."*

And as I read the Christian scripture, I invite you to listen carefully to this familiar story because it is so familiar we tend not to listen carefully.. As you hear it again, ponder these questions: Who are the good guys in the story? Who are the bad guys? Who are the victims?

*An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" Jesus replied. "How do you read it?" The lawyer answered: "'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, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."*

*But the man, wanting to justify himself, asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So, too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he took the man to an inn and took care of him. The next day he paid the innkeeper, saying: "care for the wounded man until I return." Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?' The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."*

The first thing that usually pops into our mind when we hear this is the name by which the story is usually called: The Good Samaritan. Look, however, at the way the story starts: "An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus." The focus is not on a good Samaritan; it is a story about a lawyer. A lawyer who ostensibly wants an answer to a question but who in reality is trying to justify his prejudices, his beliefs, his actions and his attitudes by second guessing Jesus' motives in healing the sick, loving the enemy and welcoming the stranger.

The lawyer asks a question to which he already knows the answer: "What must I do to live a good life?" In good rabbinic style, Jesus responds to the question with another question: "How do you see it?" "Love God and neighbor as yourself." Bingo, it's the right answer. But he pushes the argument a bit further in order to justify not acting on what he supposedly believes: "Who is my neighbor?" Before Jesus answers that question with another question, he tells the briefest of stories and then asks: "Who acted like a neighbor?" "The one who had mercy on him," answers the lawyer. Bingo, right answer again! But notice the irony of the story that Jesus told in the context in which he told it. While the lawyer judges Jesus' motives in brokering a kingdom of God that includes everyone, the story Jesus tells does not judge the motives of any of the players in the drama; it makes no value judgments about the priest, the Levite, the Samaritan, or the robber. None are painted in a positive or negative light; they just are. "A man was going down to Jerusalem. A priest passed by on the other side. So, too a Levite. A Samaritan took pity on the man." That puts the onus of the response to the story on the listener, the lawyer...and us. But most of us approach the story already knowing who's good and who's bad, second guessing Jesus' intended purpose in telling it.

Second guessing...making judgments, analyzing motives, assuming to know the reasons why people act the way they do. Some of us do it so often, we've made a faux art form of it. This kind of game-playing says more about ourselves than about the person we're second guessing. Our assessment of this story exposes our preconceived notions about how we think people should act and what we think they should do according to our value system.

We peg the priest as someone who's more interested in his organized religion than he is in helping people. But perhaps the priest was rushing to help a dying parishioner and knowing that just the week before, three men were killed on that road because they had stopped to help an ailing man who was actually a decoy for robbers who then fell upon the suckers who stopped to help, killing them and splitting the goods with the decoy. We malign the Levite, one of the strictest observers of Jewish law, because he should have known, according to our prejudice, that Jewish law required his attention to the man in the ditch. Who knows but what he was rushing to attend to his son who had been injured playing football or been in a chariot accident. Jesus simply says a priest and a Levite passed by, nothing more. Our second guessing condemns them without even a trial.

It's easy to second guess the lawyer, as well, to assume that like the stereotypical image of a lawyer, he's out to find any loophole he can in order to win the case. We even second guess Jesus' motives, assuming he's trying to make an example of the lawyer for anyone else who thinks they can twist the truth for their own benefit. But the story implies none of this. Jesus responds to the question with a good question in an attempt to help the lawyer discover the answer to his own question, an answer which resides deep in the center of his own soul. It is a marvelous example of a remedial rather than retributive response; he wants the man to learn from his question rather than punish him for not getting it. When the lawyer answers "the one who had mercy," Jesus simply responds: "go and do likewise."

Jesus shatters the grave stone of second guessing that traps us in the sepulcher of our own prejudices by offering the opportunity for a second chance. The lawyer set out to trap Jesus and justify his own inaction. The story ends, however, with Jesus giving the lawyer the benefit of the doubt, a second chance, giving him a second guess, to come up with the right answer to the question and then gives him the chance to go do likewise. It is as gracious as the Samaritan who cares for the robbed man.

Have you ever found yourself second guessing the woman whose body is covered in ink, tattoos from head to foot with symbols you can't begin to understand? Have you ever second guessed your shy neighbor's aloof response when you speak to him, assuming he doesn't want to be bothered by you? Have you ever second guessed the motives of a friend whose email or letter seemed to accuse you of something you think is unfair? It's human nature, I suppose, to second guess in order to label them as someone we don't have to care for.

But Jesus says: Go ahead and second guess the woman with the tattoos. Second guess your neighbor who keeps to himself all the time and never wants to talk. Second guess the grocery store clerk who was sharp with you in the check-out line or the oppressive boss or a spiteful co-worker. A first impression may judge their behavior as antisocial or their lifestyle as inappropriate or their decisions wrong, but a second guess gives us a chance to see them in a new light. "They are your neighbor; give them the grace to be full of God," as Ann Pittman reminds us. To amplify the Apostle Paul: In the kingdom of God, there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, old nor young, Baptist nor Catholic, rich nor poor, liberal nor conservative, citizen nor immigrant, gay nor straight, east side nor west side.....

Russ Allison Loar was in the fourth grade when, on a cold winter day in language class, his bored mind whispered to his artistic hand that a picture of the teacher, Mrs. Voss, would be more interesting than the lesson she was attempting. Second guessing her motives as those of a tyrant more than a teacher, his sketch was less than flattering and was made more so by the words he scribbled in the balloon above her head. She noticed him, of course, and nonchalantly walked over to collect the paper, asking Russ to see her after class. It was the longest 15 minutes of his young life up to that point, and after the bell rang, he found himself standing at her desk waiting for her remonstrance. But she surprised him. She wasn't angry and, in fact, she actually gave him a sweet smile as she spoke. "Please read out loud what you have written on your drawing."

After all the years that have passed since that time, Loar says, the shame of that moment has erased his memory of any words he'd written, but he still remembers the ugly sound of their heartless intentions and how odd and foreign they felt on his lips. Keen and caring teacher that she was, Mrs. Voss knew there was a valuable lesson to be learned that could not come from scolding or chiding or second guessing his motives or his attitude; she wanted to give him a second chance, second guess him, as it were, knowing the audible pronunciation of the ugly words would stay with him longer than any reprimand or punishment. "Now you know what it means to eat your words," she said, smiling, and letting him go.

(adapted from AARP Bulletin, July-August 2013).

Just as Mrs. Voss turned the tables on the young Russ Loar, Jesus turns the tables on the lawyer. If you're the expert in the law, say out loud the most important law. I want to hear you eat your words. I want to hear you second guess what it's about. By asking the lawyer to speak aloud the important law to love God and neighbor as self, Jesus turned the question from "Who is my neighbor?" into the question "Who acted like a neighbor?" From trying to second-guess in order to excuse our prejudices into examining our own activity of being neighborly. Young Russ Loar found out that actions speak volumes and second guessing isn't a fair game. Mrs. Voss knew the value of second guessing, of going beyond the first impression to give another chance, a second chance, a chance to learn, a chance to find the better self inside.

So as you listened again to this story, did you decide who the good guys are? Who are the bad guys? Who are the victims? Or did you, like me, second guess their motives, vices and virtues without really looking at the evidence? If we listen carefully, we realized no one was labeled as being any better than another in this story. No one was labeled as being any worse than another in the story. And as far as determining the victim, everyone we second guess to act according to our value judgments is the victim. If we second guess Jesus' intentions to use this story to teach us about helping the neighbor, we've done him a disservice. "If that were Jesus' intention," Dominic Crossan points out, "he would have made the Samaritan the wounded man. The parable is really about putting aside prejudice against 'the other' in order to step into the kingdom of God and act within its principles." This is a story about a Jesus who transforms the habit of second guessing into the art form of second chances. And Jesus says: Go and do likewise. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann