



Texts in Context

Everything You Know Is Wrong: Shame, E-dentity, Identity, and the Samaritan Savior of Luke 10:25–37

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Everything you know is wrong. That's how they'll make you feel. Some self-proclaimed experts in technology and marketing will come to your dying little church and make you feel bad. I've watched these people. This is how they work:

Step one: with statistics, graphs, charts, and surveys they will PowerPoint you into believing how much the world is changing, that we are on the threshold of an evolutionary transformation in human relations such as the cosmos has never seen. Our technology is seismically shifting human thought, language, emotions, and relationships. Next thing you know, they'll be telling us that our very bodies and brains are evolving, growing new digits and lobes. It's a brave new world, people. Everything is up for grabs.

Step two: the experts will induce a sense of shame because your dying little church is hopelessly out of step with the evolutionary change that is happening right in your midst. The shame might be subtle, or more direct, "Have you ever used Digg? How about Bebo? Flock? Xanga?" Flummoxed by these Esperanto-esque words of mystery, you and your council members will begin to feel helplessly ill-equipped and unprepared to meet the changing world, like in one of those dreams in which you take your coat off at school and you are wearing nothing but your underwear.

How do we preach in this age of the Internet and social networking? Perhaps it will be to trust not the glitter of technology but the word we have been given—the word that might, even now, create something out of nothing.

Step three: said experts will relieve the tension, disperse the gloom, by offering you hope—hope for a better future, a brighter tomorrow. Namely, that by following their recommendations or subscribing to their service or buying their books you will be able to regrow your church. “In ten years the church will be a much different place.” “There will be virtual everything.” “Adapt or die.” And since most of our churches are dying already, it all sounds pretty plausible. And so, for about six weeks, you get all excited because your treasurer Norm has a nephew who will update and relaunch your website for free, thus offsetting the two thousand dollars you just spent paying these experts to convince you of your necessary technology makeover. But nothing really changes.

THE E-DENTITY OF THE CHURCH?

The Internet is nothing more and nothing less than a tool used for communicating. The telephone? The daily newspaper? In the grand scheme of history, these are relatively recent inventions that will come and go. They are very useful, powerful tools for communicating. But the Internet revolution? Grand pronouncements that we now live in a virtual world are simply overstated. The Internet is a tool, and it’s an important one. But on the grand world-historic scale of tool significance, I would locate it somewhere between the printing press and the spork.

The Internet brings us a host of new conveniences and opportunities. We can reconnect with an old friend we lost touch with. We can watch that monkey-washing-the-cat video any time we feel like it. We can shop for fuzzy bunny slippers in our pajamas. Yes, the Internet is a powerful tool; use it any way you can: build a smart and creative church website, post some funny videos on YouTube, create a curiously inviting Facebook page and discover that it’s a great way to connect the names with the faces of the people who are new to your church—a *free* online church directory, so we don’t have to make people mug in front of those photographers and then pay them a small fortune for a bland, poorly designed book? That’s genius! Go nuts and have fun with your e-dentity. It’s a great opportunity for showing our humanity and our creativity to the world.¹

But (this is such a big *but* you could see it coming from a long way off, couldn’t you?) while we might try to communicate the best we can via virtual means, there is no substitute for flesh-and-blood contact. Ours is a bloody, messy, fleshy savior, and, without other bodies in the room, he is hard to imagine. Not to get all soapboxy and lay down a harsh either/or, as in *either* the Internet *or* the local brick-and-mortar church. Certainly the God who speaks through a dead dog or Balaam’s ass can speak the word in cyberspace, but we have been commanded by Jesus himself to proclaim his death in word and sacrament, and, as of this writing

¹But while you are doing this, please try not to alienate the neo-Luddites among us. Yes, you will encounter people of all ages (maybe one in ten?) who feel reduced and marginalized by social networking and other virtual attempts at community. And that’s okay. Instead of spending 30 minutes (or more?) a day on Facebook, these people would much rather read some poetry, drink a late-night glass of Chardonnay with their next door neighbor, or build a homemade, two-person submarine that can be launched in a local lake.

deadline, our tech support people have not figured out how to provide virtual Eucharist.

RECLAIMING OUR IDENTITY

These technological trends do have a more serious upside, however. Namely, they can push us back to our center. What are we really about? If there is any hope for reviving the old mainline, it will not be through schemes of relevance for the sake of relevance; it will be in leading with our strength. And here, believe it or not, Lutherans have some real treasure. We have the liturgy of the church, the *ordo*, the spine of the Western mass. It anchors and structures our new and old hymns, rites, and prayers with a gravity that sticks to our ribs. We also have this rich tradition of theology, a theology of the cross that judges and liberates at the same time. And, last but not least, we have a model of preaching, stemming from Luther himself, that is neither sentimental nor moralistic—preaching that is bold, wildly adventurous, literary, earthy, and fleshy.

We in the old mainline have been wildly unimaginative in proclaiming this word of radical grace. Too often our preaching has been canned and moralistic and sentimental.

But, alas, regarding this craft of preaching, we in the old mainline have been wildly unimaginative in proclaiming this word of gestalt-switching, life-from-death, radical grace. Too often our preaching has been canned and moralistic and sentimental. In the tradition of Luther and Kierkegaard, it's high time we got much more daring. Starting next Sunday, let's preach sermons that are bold, tense, puzzling, sublime, ecstatic, fleshy, messy, and beautiful. We've been given this great gift of proclamation. Why are we so timid? Why are we being so religious? Why are we merely giving "how to" lessons on successful living when we are called to preach this word that kills in order to make alive? Yes, we should use the best, most current technology available to get the word out about what is happening in our communities. But don't forget about the real treasure we possess, even in our broken, dying earthen vessels. The real treasure is this wild, untamed, subversive word of this God who loves us madly and will go to ridiculous lengths to prove it to us.

LATE-SUMMER LUKE TEXTS: EXAMPLE STORIES OR CHRIST CRUCIFIED?

Summertime, and the livin' is easy. But not for you, dear preacher of the holy word. We are tempted to lighten up in the summer, to get all pithy and sentimental and cute and digestible. But don't do it. In and out of season, our calling is to bring the noise, in whatever vivid, bold, and creative ways we can bring it, and there are some heartbreakingly beautiful texts here with which to work.

Most of our July through September Gospel texts are taken from the central part of Luke, chapters 10 through 16. Scholars have called it “the Lukan travel narrative,” but it seems more like a travelogue with no particular place to go. What little travel there is seems to be Luke’s excuse to set forth various and sundry teachings of Jesus.

Although the lectionary has some glaring gaps in the travel narrative (most notably, the prodigal son has run off again), these late-summer texts include some of Luke’s greatest hits, such as the mission of the seventy, in which the disciples actually do something right for a change; busy Martha and one-thing Mary; the model prayer for the coming of the kingdom that Jesus taught his disciples; the parable of the Rich Fool; and, last but not least, the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Here’s one way you might be tempted to lighten things up a bit. Many of these pericopes could easily be turned into example stories. You know: “Be good!” “Be like Mary and Lazarus and Jesus.” “Don’t be bad, like Martha and the rich fool.” Yes, we are tempted to turn many of these texts into mere example stories, shaming little morality lessons that leave the hearer with the sensation of “being gummed to death by a flock of wild geese.”²

SHAME REDUX: THE EXAMPLE-STORY SERMON

Ever heard of “Goofus and Gallant”? It’s the name of a little morality comic strip in *Highlights* magazine, a publication that mysteriously can be found only in the waiting rooms of doctors’ and dentists’ offices. At any rate, the character Gallant (as you may have guessed from his name) is pretty much perfect. He’s got excellent personal hygiene, he’s always smiling, he wears nice clean sweaters, and he *always* does the right thing. Gallant shares with his friends, he helps out around the house, and he’s kind to every living creature, even the furry woodland animals he encounters. Gallant is what we call in the ethics business a moral exemplar, a human model for our behavior.

There’s nothing wrong with teaching children good behavior, good social skills. But the big problem for us in the church business is that stuff like this infects the way we read the Bible.

Goofus? He’s just the opposite. Bossy and mean, Goofus talks back to his mom and dad, has awful table manners, and complains about everything. He is the moral anti-exemplar, if you will. We are *not* supposed to do what he does. Don’t be a Goofus. Be a Gallant.

Now, I guess there’s nothing wrong with teaching children good behavior,

²Sheldon Tostengard, on the subject of preaching simplistic moralisms, as recounted by his students at Luther Seminary.

good social skills. But the big problem for us in the church business is that stuff like this infects the way we read the Bible and the way we exegete a text for preaching. It's like a virus. Goofus and Gallant show up in the *Bible*, where they don't belong.

The Bible is not a book of moral examples, filled with Gallants and Goofuses. The Bible is supposed to kill you, to cut you open, to knock down these idols you keep making—idols of a God in your own image—in order that the real God of life and love and grace can be revealed. I hate it when we go all Goofus and Gallant on the Bible. We construct these “Bible heroes” out of the likes of David (?) and Solomon (?), two of the most complex characters in all of literature, who both do some very nasty things. We totally tame many of the other colorful characters in the Bible and make them all clean and cute. We even turn Jesus into a great big Gallant. “What Would Jesus Do?” we ask ourselves when facing moral decisions. But what Jesus *did* do was fling himself deep into the machinery of the Roman Empire and the corrupt religious establishment and get crucified on a cross for it. And in the midst of all the darkness and chaos, he trusted in his uniquely intimate relationship with God; he trusted that God would find a way somehow to carry out God's promises. How's that for your moral exemplar?

THE PARABLE OF THE UNLIKELY HERO, THE SAMARITAN SAVIOR

On July 12, 2010, the so-called “Good Samaritan” parable appears (Luke 10:25–37). You could look at this as an example story. It's not bad, as example stories go. It is much better than a “Goofus and Gallant” comic strip. But it's so much more than an example story. There is sheer beauty in its form. This is flat-out good storytelling. It establishes a pattern, a pattern of recurring despair; and then, in grand style, in one simple phrase, it turns the expected pattern on its head.

The parable starts out: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho” (Luke 10:30). This little word “down” is drenched in meaning and is the key to how the story works. Since Jerusalem is about 2,300 feet above sea level, while Jericho is about 1,300 feet below sea level, “going down” makes up the symbolic landscape for the parable. “Down” also has a sort of heavy, urban, slangy weight to it. This was a dangerous road. It was once called “the bloody way.” The way “down” leads right through a very bad neighborhood, in which the hearer can expect some very bad neighbors.

In terms of how this story works, this preacher found the most interesting stuff in the work of Bernard Brandon Harris, who suggests that the parable is structured by a series of stair steps, leading downward.³

(1) The first step takes us down. As he was going down, this man “fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.” Downward step #1: the man is naked and dying on the side of the road.

(2) Step two takes us down further. “Now by chance a priest was going down

³Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 189–220.

that road.” There is hope here. After all, a priest is one who has been called, set apart to serve others, to mediate between God and the people. Surely the priest will help this man. But no: “When [the priest] saw him, he passed by on the other side.” Things are going from bad to worse here. The naked dying man keeps going down, and we, as hearers of the story, are going down too. Downward step #2: the priest’s avoidance and refusal to help.

(3) Step three takes us down even further. Here’s that glimmer of hope again: “So likewise a Levite.” And we think that maybe, just maybe, this expert in the law, this theologian, will help. But again: “When he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.” And again the world of the parable continues downward, steps down further and further. Things are hopeless, no one cares. And what hurts even more is this feeling that we’ve been set up, sucker punched, fooled. Hope appears on the horizon only to knock the wind out of us one more time. Downward step #3: there is no compassion to be found in the human heart; it is a fool’s hope.

(4) Step four is the great reversal. “Then a Samaritan....” What’s a Samaritan? A Samaritan is, to us listeners, an outcast, a half-breed, someone impure, someone less than human. But the story says that a Samaritan while on a journey came near the man, and when he saw him, he “had compassion” for him (Luke 10:33). “He had compassion”: three of the most beautiful and striking words in all of Jesus’ parables. In these three little words, that downward movement comes to a screeching halt, and we, the hearers, are elevated by these simple words of bold and fleshy, face-to-face human compassion. Everything you know is wrong. There is such a thing as compassion. Mercy exists, hope exists, love exists. Step #4: all the downward steps are turned on their head and defeated, because compassion, and not selfish avoidance, is the final word.

The story concludes with richly textured, detailed words of just how concrete, real, and intimate this compassion is. Note the great contrast between the stark, spare setup and the lavish punch line: “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’” (Luke 10:34–35). A series of stair steps, leading downward, meets a huge surprise of an ending. That’s how the story works. Our challenge now? How do we recreate it for our hearers in a way that heightens the tension and glories in the resolution of compassion?

The Best Moral Example Reading

Is this an example story? Yes, of course, and it’s far more compelling than Goofus and Gallant. It transgresses the expected pattern. Like the good news at its core, it tries to catch us, to trick us into seeing that compassion and mercy do not follow our expectations and our boundaries. The hero of the story is the hated Sa-

maritan. He is our Gallant, our moral exemplar. This very one whom we have excluded from fellowship and community, he's the one who gets it right.

If this is as much of the whole Christian story as you can swallow, we want you to go for it. You could do a lot worse than simply vowing to live a life committed to showing compassion to others.

Who is my neighbor? Everyone. How do you love your neighbor? By showing compassion. We are to go and do likewise. We are to show compassion, in very concrete ways, to anyone in need. If you want morality, that's not too bad. If this is as much of the whole Christian story as you can swallow, we want you to go for it. You could do a lot worse than simply vowing to live a life committed to showing compassion to others. Here the preacherly task is how to re-create the moment of the compassion-drenched surprise. In a story so familiar, how do we set up the downward steps and let that hope-sucking tension develop without prematurely arriving at the surprise?

The Barthian Flipperoo Reading

But there's more here than simply moral instruction. There always is, when we are dealing with the living word. I believe this story is also about the one who gives the command, the one who orders us to live a life of compassion. And so, I want us to try to hear this story from a totally different perspective. (This is a move attributed to Karl Barth, but I'm quite certain he's not the first scholar to think it up.)

When we first hear the story, we think of ourselves as the person going by on the road. We think: "What would I do in that situation?" "Would I help out?" But what if we change our perspective? What if, instead of seeing ourselves as the people going by on the road, we see ourselves as the person who is lying in the ditch, half-dead, bleeding to death? Now, what is the parable about? Now maybe it's not only about radically scrambling the boundaries that define our neighborliness, but also has to do with where our help comes from. Where does compassion come from? And maybe now we can see that this story is also about Jesus and about how he comes to help us.

Just pretend, for a moment, that you are traveling alone in a dangerous place. You are robbed and severely beaten. That is you in the ditch, lying there, bleeding and half-dead, just barely alive. The priest comes by, one who is "set apart" to minister to you. He's supposed to be able to give you help, but he pretends not to see you. And then the Levite comes by, but he doesn't help either. Again, he doesn't stop at the accident scene because he might end up covered in blood. Finally, this Samaritan comes by, this outcast, this half-breed, and, in a moment of utter surprise, he helps you.

Is Jesus the Samaritan in the story? Was he talking about himself when he told this parable? He's the one who helps us. He's the one who is our true neighbor—this scandalous one, this Jew whom the others considered unclean. Jesus truly sees us and truly takes our side, even when we don't expect to get help from him. And he doesn't just pat us on the back and give us an encouraging word. He comes to us, binds up our wounds, anoints us with oil, carries us in his arms, and assures us that, because of the promise of God that he so completely entered into, everything *really is* going to be okay.

Is Jesus the Samaritan in the story? Was he talking about himself when he told this parable?

Maybe it's like this: on the way home from your dentist's office you have a flat tire, and you open the trunk to find that your spare tire is bad too. This old college friend you recognize, Gallant, comes along in his great big sedan, looking all neat and tidy. But he pretends not to see you and whizzes on by. And then you see your old high school friend Goofus pull up. He's overweight, his hair is messed up, he has empty beer cans in the back of his pickup truck, and he smells kind of strange. But he stops and helps you. He lights the flares, brings you to the gas station where he works, buys you a raspberry slushy, and tells you stupid jokes until you smile. Then he brings you back and fixes your car and sends you on your way.

Or, imagine this: you are walking home from your peace and justice candle-light vigil one night. You get mugged, and stabbed three times. You see your friends from the meeting just drive on by. They assume you're just a drunk guy, lying in the street. Suddenly, a big car, a limo, pulls up. The door opens and out walks Rush Limbaugh. He picks you up in his arms, carries you to his car, bandages your wounds, drives you to the emergency room, and the next day stops by your hospital room with flowers and candy.

That is the good news. It's not simply that we are to be good and to help others. The message is that we are helped and saved in Jesus Christ. He is the one who comes to us and shows us, with his life, what real compassion is. And it's in the name of this wild, bloody compassion of Christ that we are given the freedom and the permission to show compassion to everyone whom God sets in our path.

Having a thick and detailed understanding of our cultural context is an important tool for preaching. But don't be shamed into thinking that getting hip to the latest technological trends is going to suddenly put your church back on the map of relevance. Who knows? It might already be too late. Like Jesus himself, our old mainline denominations might have to die so that the Spirit might bring about some new thing.

Nevertheless, in and out of season, whether we are sowing or reaping, we are called to faithfully proclaim this word of grace. And instead of trying to make your

church appear more culturally relevant, lead with your strength, trust the treasure that we have in these earthen vessels, the living word of this deep, mad, passionate, subversive love of Father, Son, and Spirit.

So have at it, dear preachers of the word. Bring it, in all its fleshy glory. Bring the word, the word that scrambles your maps and smashes your idols, the word that kills and makes alive. Everything you know is wrong. As you approach these lessons and parables, spoken by Jesus on his journey to the cross, trust this word that always calls you to start over, to let go of all that you thought you needed, in order that you might open your hands and receive the gift of this new birth. Trust the word of God to, once again, create something out of nothing. ⊕

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