

Amos 7: 7 – 17
Psalm 82
Colossians 1: 1 – 14
Luke 10: 25 – 37

Notes on the Epistle Lesson

A business or personal letter written today follows a certain form. When we read a letter, we know instantly whether the letter is from a friend, a company with whom we do business, or a solicitation from a company or individual who would like to do business with us. When we write a letter, we follow conventions that come automatically. For example, we usually begin with the date the letter is written, follow that with a salutation, and then begin the body of the letter. We conclude with something such as “Sincerely” or “Cordially yours” and then with our name. We almost never consciously follow this convention but do so without reflection.

In the same way, letters written in the first century followed their own pattern. The letter would begin with the sender’s name, followed by the name of the letter’s recipient (see Colossians 1: 1 – 2a). The next statement will be a wish for peace for the recipient. Paul almost always alters this to say “grace and peace” (Colossians 1:2b). The last element before the body of the letter will be a statement of thanksgiving from the writer to the recipient. In a business letter this will often be a declaration of gratitude for the successful business relationship the two people have enjoyed.

All of Paul’s letters follow these conventions. (The lone exception is the letter to the Galatians in which the Thanksgiving is replaced by an expression of astonishment at how the Galatian churches had deserted the gospel.) In the letter to the Colossians, Paul expounds at length on his gratitude for the faith exhibited by the Christians in Colossae. Rather than a brief statement, Paul enthusiastically reflects his joy at the way the Colossian disciples’ were living out their faith.

Notes on the Gospel Lesson

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a long, winding, and dangerous road. (See photo at right. The road is the valley between the mountains.)

Although this is one of the best-known and most-beloved of Jesus’ parables, there is much about the story that is often misunderstood. To have a better appreciation of this passage, there are several points that must be understood.



Although this is widely known, we must begin by stating that Jesus was a rabbi. It was common practice to question a rabbi, both to test his knowledge and to learn from him. Indeed, this

practice is common in Judaism today. In this week's reading, the lawyer is testing Jesus' knowledge of Torah, just as Luke states. Jesus' answer is straightforward and it is likely that almost any first (or twenty first) century rabbi would have given the same or a similar answer. The answer to the follow-up question is where Jesus' approach is unique.

The lawyer's question is not intended to trap Jesus but to probe more deeply into his knowledge of the Law (as compared to the lawyers; hence the desire to "justify himself"). In fact, the Law identifies just who one's neighbor is. More than merely a person who lives in close proximity, one's neighbor is another member of one's family. The very passage that contains the phrase, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself," also states, "You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor". Hebrew often uses parallelisms where a single thought is repeated using different words. (See, for example, Leviticus 20: 10 – 14 or Isaiah 40:4.) Therefore, a "correct" answer that Jesus should have given the lawyer was that one's neighbor is a member of one's family. Remember that in the first century, as is true in the modern indigenous population of the Holy Land, people live in extended families. It is not unusual to have three or even four generations living together under one roof.

Jesus, however, extends the definition of neighbor. The injured man on the side of the road was stripped naked. Generally in the first century a person could be identified by how they dressed. There were slight variations in how someone from Capernaum dressed as compared to how someone from Nazareth would wear similar garments. The farther away in distance from one village to another, the greater the variation in appearance. Therefore it was easy to tell at a glance if a person approaching on the road was "one of us". The injured man could not be so identified. Was he one of us – were we obligated to help him – or was he one of them; to whom we owed nothing?

The people who heard Jesus tell this parable would have found no fault with the actions of the priest or the Levite. The injured man was unconscious and one would have to get very close, most likely touching him, to determine whether he was dead or alive. Nothing was more unclean to an observant Jew than a corpse. A priest or Levite going down that road was either going to or coming from service in the Temple. (There were many more priests than were needed to serve in the Temple so many of them lived in Jericho. They would come to Jerusalem for a two week period of service and then return home until their time in the rotation came again.) If these two men were going to the Temple, corpse-pollution would have barred them from service until an extensive process of purification was completed. If they were going to Jericho, the corpse pollution would have forced them to return to Jerusalem for the purification and delayed their time at home. Their actions were not only perfectly normal; they were the "correct" thing to do.

It was instead the hated Samaritan who stepped up to help the injured man. Fortunately, we have no modern relationship in the United States that compares to the hatred that Jews and Samaritans had for each other. History records numerous examples of cruelty and barbaric actions that the two groups committed on each other. Jesus could not have picked a more loathsome "hero" for his story. The lawyer's answer of "the one who showed him mercy" must have been said through clenched teeth. He would not even use the title "Samaritan" in his response.

Jesus' meaning goes far beyond the traditional understanding of showing kindness to other people; even to those in need. By invoking the term "neighbor", Jesus is expanding the meaning of family. "Who is my neighbor?" or "who is in my family?" The answer is everyone. All humanity is one family with one Father. One's family obligations are owed to all people. It was a difficult lesson in the first century. It is a difficult lesson today.