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A Different Approach to Violence

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Since it was first published in 1949, Joseph Campbell's book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* has deeply influenced storytellers, psychologists, writers, and directors. Campbell wrote his book after years of researching ancient myths from all around the world and discovered many commonalities that he calls a monomyth. His argument is there is only one myth, and all myths exhibit the same or similar pattern. This myth revolves around a hero, and Campbell identified the journey of the hero which also follows a predictable pattern. You can see this pattern in stories like the Star Wars trilogies, *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*, *the Matrix*, and many other popular movies and TV series. While sometimes disagreed with, or criticized for not being inclusive, Campbell's work has made a lasting impression with American storytelling: both popular and classic.

One of the points he makes in his book isn't just the journey of a hero, it is the importance of having these hero stories in our culture. In other words, Campbell went so far as to say why he believes people need heroes. He writes, "It has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward in counteraction to those that tend to tie it back." I hear Campbell saying heroes serve the important purpose of inspiring us, helping us do those things which are right, even if they seem hard or daunting. Heroes help us realize we all have grow up and face the challenges we all have to figure out how to deal with. Campbell went on to say heroes are so important that without them, people can become neurotic, maybe even narcissistic, as without a hero pointing people to live for something greater than themselves, people's views can become so small they might believe everything is all about them.

In the wake of many tragedies we've watched happen in major cities in the United States in the last several weeks, many voices have spoken up not only in anger and frustration, but voices looking desperately for a hero to rise up and tell us all what to do about all the anger and violence going on in our country. Some of the voices look to clergy to lead the way. Others look to government, both local and national. Others look to the regular people who often step up in times like these. But no one seems to have an easy solution.

So perhaps it is divine providence or coincidence or luck that today we heard what could be called a hero story in the Bible: the hero story known as the Parable of the Good Samaritan. It is a story known to many, a story that has taken on a life of its own, and is often the inspiration for ministries, laws protecting the well intentioned, and businesses whose purpose is whole person wellness. It might seem like an easy story to preach this morning: the reminder that our neighbor is the person we can't stand who put aside their own prejudice to be compassionate and help the nearly dead victim in the ditch. We need to do the same thing. So go and be nice to everyone.

But I am not sure this parable is that simple. To see it this way is to remove it from the context the author of Luke's Gospel took so much effort to establish. First and foremost, the parable is the second part of a conversation Jesus had with a lawyer. The type of lawyer Luke is talking about here isn't the kind of lawyer we have now; this would have been someone well educated in the religious laws. Luke wants those of us reading this Gospel to know this lawyer is a really smart guy, very intelligent. The author also told us right away the lawyer's intentions in starting this conversation with Jesus. To test Jesus, and to figure out what kind of test, we have to look closer at the questions he asked.

Did you notice the lawyer's first question? The question about what the lawyer needs to do to inherit eternal life? That is a deep question, some translators tell us it is a question much like what is the meaning of life? Or what is his purpose, or how is he to live. Did you notice the question was in the singular? The lawyer asked about himself only, about what he needs to do. In response, Jesus asked this expert of the law and probably the scriptures too to tell him what the scriptures say AND what he reads there. Two questions that ask for both information and allows for the lawyer to give Jesus an interpretation of what he has read.

We heard that the lawyer gave the correct answer, perhaps textbook correct. And Jesus then told him to go and do it. Go and love God with your whole self and love your neighbor as yourself. While some of us might say that is much easier said than done, the lawyer, the author of Luke told us, pushed his agenda further by asking another question, in order to justify himself. I'm not sure if he was justifying testing Jesus in the first place or justifying how he lives, it isn't clear. But either way we have the lawyer to thank for asking the question that birthed the parable we know so well: Who is my neighbor? Did you notice this lawyer is

really focused on himself? He didn't ask who is a neighbor, but *who is his neighbor?* Not for the sake of the neighbor, it seems, but so the lawyer can have more information. For the lawyer, this conversation seems to be all about him.

In response to all this; in response to one man's questions about what *he* needs to do to inherit eternal life and who *his* neighbor is, Jesus told the parable about the traveler on a dangerous road, a road that had the real life reputation of being a dangerous, violent road, a place where it was not uncommon for a person to be victimized; beaten, robbed, even killed. It seemed to be accepted that this road was so violent as no one seemed shocked or surprised by the act of violence done to the traveler. Historians tell us this road was indeed dangerous, especially if a person traveled it alone, as there were plenty of secluded places for bandits to hide. In the very last speech he ever gave, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. mentioned this road and how he and his wife drove it when they visited the Holy Land. His first impression was it was no wonder Jesus chose that road for the setting of this parable because it is a road with many sharp corners and hidden turns, a frightening landscape conducive to violence.

And so we see what a situation like that, where violence is expected, where there are no safeguards, can do to people and society. For the traveler it created physical pain, loss of property, loss of protective covering, loss of well-being, and almost caused death. The traveler was abandoned in a ditch, once the robbers had gotten what they wanted, the traveler was of no use to them. Violence can do that to people: it can make people see each other as disposable. So much so that the first two people to happen down the road just passed by the man in the ditch. Dr. King also spoke about those characters in his final speech: the priest and the Levite, and how we can imagine all kinds of reasons why they didn't stop: they didn't want to violate purity laws, they were busy, maybe they went to get help, maybe they thought he was already dead and were angry at the violence that was allowed to happen on the road. Dr. King imagined they were afraid, for violence doesn't only breed anger, it also creates fear. Perhaps the priest and the Levite were afraid of being ambushed themselves, perhaps they just wanted to get to safety as soon as they could, or perhaps they felt there was no need for anyone else to die. Perhaps they were overwhelmed and didn't know what to do. Despite their ranking, despite their knowledge, they were still human beings.

This is where the Good Samaritan comes in. In the hero stories of Jesus' day, the very predictable pattern in a story like this was that after two upstanding religious leaders failed at being a hero, failed at doing the right thing, along would

come a common Jewish person, and they would be the hero. But in Jesus' story there doesn't seem to be a hero, not in the classical sense. The presence and actions of the Samaritan seems to serve a deeper purpose.

A Samaritan is the last person the lawyer would have expected to show up in a story like that. And the Samaritan went above and beyond helping the wounded man in the ditch. He got down in the ditch with the person, he bound those wounds, he took him to safety, he paid for every need that man would have just so the man could be made well again, so the man could live. This is extraordinary action and it can signal to us this was not an ordinary man. That the Samaritan did not pass by the man in the ditch sounds a lot like the promise the Lord made to Amos in our Old Testament reading when the Lord promised he would never again pass by the people of Israel.

Jesus then asked the lawyer a very important question: who was a neighbor to the man to fall into the hands of the robbers? We might be tempted to think the lawyer shows his prejudice when he refuses to say the Samaritan and instead says the "one who showed mercy". But I wonder if the lawyer answered that way because the lawyer had just been shown his own self and that was a humbling experience. Remember, the lawyer had asked Jesus to tell him who his neighbor was and Jesus asked him who was a neighbor to man who had been beaten, robbed, and thrown in a ditch to die. Mercy is what brought the man out of the ditch of violence, mercy is the trait of God. There are those who interpret this parable as seeing the man in the ditch is the lawyer, and it is Jesus, casting himself as the Samaritan, who shows mercy that breaks the cycle of violence instead of a heroic act expected by the expected type of hero. Jesus' parable challenges the lawyer that if he isn't prepared to see the merciful love of God in the Samaritan, he could be left in that ditch to die. Perhaps the lawyer was trying to show Jesus what a great guy he was – maybe even how he could be his own hero – but Jesus challenged him to not know God's law but to receive and live into God's love.

Maybe when we consider the parable of the Good Samaritan we are used to thinking about where we see ourselves in the parable, and like the lawyer, and Biblical scholar Amy Levine, we imagine we are the Samaritan on a good day and the Levite or Priest on bad days. Maybe we hear this parable and think about how we might respond to a neighbor in need. But maybe, after hearing over and over again about the tragic acts of violence not only in Minneapolis, Baton Rouge and Atlanta, where a man was found hanging in a tree, or Dallas, or in Orlando but also in other cities in other countries around the world it might be easier to see

anyone of us can be the man in the ditch: the one who violence has made us feel beaten nearly to death and thrown away, or to see in a new light that those we look to for answers can do little more than point us to the Light in the darkness, the Resurrected One, the Son of God who wasn't afraid to traverse the dangerous road we built, who got down into the ditch with the bloody mess we've made of humankind and washes away the filth of death created by violent acts, who binds up wounds we inflict on each other, and who reminds us of our true purpose to care for each other, as the Samaritan in the parable reminded the innkeeper, and is willing to pay the price, even if it be a high price, for our well-being.

Instead of relying on a hero of human invention who only exhibits exaggerated attributes of what we think a hero in a violent culture is like, maybe the first thing we can do is take up Jesus' deep and healing challenge to the lawyer and receive the mercy of God, and let that mercy wash us and heal us of any anger, racism, homophobia, sexism, ageism, frustration, or fear that a violent culture can create. Then and only then we can go and be among one another as agents of God's mercy, forgiving instead of giving harsh judgment, listening instead of shouting, looking for ways to create safe places for everyone to forgive, reconcile and heal, to introduce by our acts the love of God to those who have rejected God, and be a way for a world that seems to be focused on violence that there is another way. A way where instead of absent heroes we have mercy, grace, and the love of God in Christ.