

Samaritan Bazinga
First Reading - Isaiah 58:6-10
Second Reading - Luke 10:25-37

In the long-adored CBS sitcom, *The Big Bang Theory*, actor Jim Parsons played the role of Sheldon Cooper so perfectly that the character became an icon of 21st Century culture. Sheldon, a physicist at Caltech, was the kind of genius who knows it and wants to be sure you know it, too. Tall, finicky, fussy, and obsessive-compulsive about ... everything, he somehow made geek ... chic. Short on self-awareness, his emotions paradoxically both stunted and fragile, Sheldon could drive his friends to distraction with his meticulous expectations, idiosyncratic habits, and bizarre demands. In the infamous *Roommate Agreement*, one clause states — *Pieces of tape on the bathroom floor specify where one should stand when flossing or peeing. Evidence uncovered during an inspection of noncompliance will result in the loss of TV privileges.* As a high maintenance friend on a scale of 1 to 10, Sheldon would rank as at least a 72.

When Sheldon attempted a joke, or fooled you, or won a game of Dungeons and Dragons against you, he would celebrate his own genius while simultaneously managing to add this coda to our collective cultural lexicon — *Bazinga!* Though its use in a game of *Scrabble* would be

debatable, *Bazinga* was destined to take its place among other *gotcha* exclamations like — Stuart Scott’s *Boo-yah*; Chris Berman’s *Back, Back, Back...*; the Zombies’ *Who’s your daddy?*; Hip-hop’s *Oh, snap!*; and Will Hunting’s *How you like ‘dem apples?*

Today we read of Jesus’ debate with a legal scholar of Mosaic Law. You could call it a 1st Century theology slam, and it contains one huge *Bazinga*. As usual Jesus provokes a variety of reactions to his presence and his word. To the disciples, all Jesus had to say was — *Follow me* — and they followed. Others reacted with a sense of awe, as Matthew reported — “*Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.*”

Yet, before long, impressed religious insiders became increasingly suspicious and defensive. Mark observes — “*The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him.*” Everybody knows that infuriating and insufferable and patronizing know-it-all who is forever posing as the expert on everything under the sun, and is seemingly incapable living without having the last word. Did I mention they are insufferable? Inevitably, Jesus was going to come across that guy.

Tolstoy said that the chief harm of arrogance is that *“It interferes with a person's main task in life - becoming a better person.”* And by the time we get to Luke 10, we find a skeptical lawyer whose arrogance extends to a level that he assumes he can crush Jesus in a contest of wits. That takes some moxie!

Among my favorite *Far Side* cartoons features three 1st Century women riding on two donkeys and a camel, each adorned with bumper stickers. The first one says — *Our Son Is An Honor Student*; the second one says — *Our Son Is In Medical School*; but the third one says — *Our Son Is God*. Who’s going to compete with that? The rider on the first donkey says with disgust — *Well, if it isn’t Joseph and Mary*. Mary’s got the royal flush. Nobody is going to upstage Mary, right? *“Our daughter could read when she was two.” “Oh yeah, my boy Jesus is ... God.”*

So, imagine the arrogance, the conceit of the Mosaic lawyer in our text today — *In this corner with a 1600 SAT score, a Masters in Rhetoric from Oxford, and a PhD in Philosophy... The Jerusalem Genius! ... And in this corner... God!*

What was the lawyer thinking? *“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.’”*

Observing this dialogue, I’d be thinking — *Okay, Okay, they agree on the same answer. Now would be a good time for the lawyer to sit down. Leave it be ... leave it ... You can tell your buddies it was a draw.* But no, Perry Mason here thinks he is backing Jesus into a corner. Luke reports — *“But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’”* This is where the reader has to be thinking — *Oh no, he didn’t! Get me some popcorn, let’s see who’s gonna be backing into a corner now!”*

So, Jesus responds, as Jesus sometimes does, with a story, a parable. Folks who have never opened a Bible can spit out the basic outline of the story. A man is hoofing it down a dangerous road where he is robbed, beaten, and left behind half dead. Two religious guys pass by the victim, and for reasons not known, they do not stop to help. Third guy comes upon the

scene and stops to help, and not just a little bit. He bandages the victim's wounds, puts him up in a hotel, and pays the innkeeper to check in on him and make sure the guest is recovering.

Moral of the story? Don't be the jerk who is indifferent to suffering. When you witness suffering, do something. It is a fundamental, central priority repeated throughout the Old and New Testaments. Our God alleviates suffering and expects us to participate in that work of relief, hospitality, healing, and grace, particularly in times like ours when an insidious spirit of callous cruelty is fueling efforts to eliminate the means and the structures through which we exercise compassion as a people.

A society indifferent to suffering cannot claim to honor God. We know that. The lawyer testing Jesus knew that. He even admitted that in repeating what Jesus had claimed to be the greatest commandment — *“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.”*

A parable highlighting the call of God to alleviate suffering stands on its own as a primary lesson germane to every time and place. The lawyer, a scholar in Mosaic law, would know that. By the time Jesus mentions a

second temple employee too busy to help, surely the lawyer was thinking, *“Okay, okay, I get it. I’ve heard this sermon a thousand times, and preached it a hundred times myself. Alleviating suffering is intrinsic to serving God.”* He’s thinking — *“Jesus, you are not telling me anything I don’t already know.”* The lawyer, like us, knows the mandate to alleviate suffering, and probably feels like us, the twinge of guilt in knowing we are not doing enough.

The Old and New Testaments are emphatic about the mandate to alleviate suffering. Isaiah said, *“If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.”*

Yet, we do know that to alleviate suffering is central to the calling of calling of Christ. So, when the mountains are drowned by a hurricane, the Texas hills are submerged by the floods, the child needs a sponsor in Haiti, the family reeling from illness needs a meal, the people dodging bombs in Gaza and Ukraine need our prayers and our advocacy, we respond. We can, should, and we will do more.

We know there is something fundamentally wrong when people sing Jesus loves the little children and take food from their mouths at the same time. The lawyer knows that. We know that. And we know we need to do more if we hope to counter the forces of cruelty.

So, up to this point, Jesus and the lawyer, if not on the same page, are at least reading from the same book. Yet, it is here, when you least expect it, Jesus breaks out the ***Bazinga!***

“So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.” Yeah right, preach it Jesus. Boos and hisses for the Levite. We’re with you... But then, Jesus goes and does it — *“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.”* **Bazinga!** Uh, oh, Jesus, you’ve done it now! A Samaritan as the hero? **Oh, snap!**

In between Galilee and Judah was the territory of Samaria, which in the 1st Century is still experiencing the impact of events that transpired over 700 years earlier. Assyria, the big dog in the 8th Century BCE neighborhood, got tired of wrestling with its smaller neighbor and decided to invade and conquer the northern kingdom of Israel. Consequently, the Assyrians

resettled (ie. deported) a large number of the conquered Israelites to other parts of the Assyrian empire. At the same time, the Assyrians resettled people from other conquered lands, into Israel. The intermingling of the remaining Israelites with the foreign peoples forcefully resettled in Israel eventually led to emergence of a people known as Samaritans.

Over time, the Samaritans came to understand themselves as descendants of Abraham who recognized the sole authority of the Pentateuch (the 1st five books of the Scriptures). In contrast to their southern neighbors or cousins in Jerusalem and Judah, the Samaritans believed God established God's dwelling place on Mt. Gerizim in Samaria instead of Mt. Zion in Jerusalem. And thus, a big ol' feud was born — Hatfield/McCoy, Carolina/Duke, Garnet and Black/Orange and Purple, Red State/Blue State, Sweet/Unsweet — Difference becomes suspicion becomes prejudice becomes animosity becomes the awkward silence at the Thanksgiving table. The people of Jerusalem and Judah wanted nothing to do with their northern cousins. They looked down upon them, prohibited contact with them, and labeled their beliefs and ways as heresy.

“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.” Bazinga!

Jesus displays the audacity to make the Samaritan the hero in the story. It is the Samaritan who exemplifies how God intends us to live with our neighbors, particularly those enduring suffering. It's as though Jesus is outing the lawyer for not living up to the standards of the Samaritan. Jesus exposes the self-righteous condescension of the lawyer who has basically asked who is deserving of the lawyer's love, care, support, friendship. He wants to limit his burden by having the ability to select who is worthy of his effort, time, resources. Deserve is always a dangerous word, particularly when you are so sure you are the one who can tell who is deserving. The more self-important you become the smaller that list of the deserving becomes — *Yes. Yes. No. Yes. No. No! Obviously no. Not on your life! Are you kidding me? A Samaritan? Absolutely not.*

Jesus basically flips the question on the lawyer. Instead of — *Who is my neighbor?* The question becomes — *What kind of neighbor are you?*

Do you think the injured victim in the ditch cared that the sole person who came to his aid was a Samaritan? Do you think he might have a more

generous understanding of the Samaritans in the future? How do you think people will remember you as a neighbor? How does your neighborliness reflect upon Jesus? In 1 John we read, *“Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”*

Thanks to Kathy Garner and Rebecca Guzman, I was introduced to a poem entitled *Beloved*, which also happens to be a word we are going to study on this Fall. The poem speaks to the assurance of a God who will not rest when his children suffer along their journey. It is a great word of comfort, and yet at the same time a word of profound challenge as we consider both who our neighbors are and what kind of neighbors we will be along the road of life. An excerpt reads —

I can tell you
that you will know
the strange graces
that come to our aid
only on a road
such as this,
that fly to meet us
bearing comfort
and strength,
that come alongside us
for no other cause
than to lean themselves

toward our ear
and with their
curious insistence
whisper our name:

Beloved.

Beloved.

Beloved. (Jan Richardson, *Circle of Grace*)

How great the love of God, who claims us as neighbor and acts on
that commitment! How great the love of God, who bears this love and
support to us through the neighbors in our lives! How great the love of God,
who awakens us to the question that will define our own legacy — What
kind of neighbor will you be? Amen.