

“An Ancient Story”

Text: Luke 10: 29-37

Dr. Geordie Campbell

March 14, 2010

On the first night of our journey to the Holy Land we stayed in Jericho, the oldest continuously inhabited city on earth. By mystery of Spirit, I want to take you to that town again this morning. More: I want us to take hold of an ancient story that happened there, a parable of Jesus that is absolutely core to Christian faith.

Before we get to the story though, let me give you a bit more setting. Not only is Jericho the oldest city on the planet dating back some 8,000 years¹, it is also among the very lowest spots on earth. It is tucked way down deep on the floor of the Judean Desert, 800 feet below sea level. In fact, the altitude drops precipitously as you travel the road from Jerusalem to Jericho as the parable suggests. In a mere 17 miles the traveler descends 3,300 feet - most of it winding along a barren highway.²

And so – old and low, this is Jericho. But more, too. It is a town immersed in poverty. This is due in large part to the harsh wall that shuts off access and opportunity from one part of the land to the others. Jericho is in the West Bank where the poverty rate is somewhere between 40 and 70 percent (depending on who your guide is). So this makes it a tough town; a town of difficult life for its inhabitants; a town with on the edges of struggle.

It’s also a town with palpable military presence. Along our way there were security stops at the points of passage along those walled encampments. It was routine that an armed guard would board the bus and ask for passports. Before we got to edges of Jericho our guide gave us these instructions. “If they ask where we stayed last night, tell them that we were along the Dead Sea. Do not tell them we stayed in Jericho.”

None-the-less, it was precisely there . . . Jericho . . . on a not-so-easy-low road . . . in a bony-dry patch of desert . . . on a pathway where danger was almost certain . . . that we receive the ancient story from the scriptures today.

Quite simply, it’s the parable of the Good Samaritan, in which we are given a looking-glass-invitation to find ourselves. In fact, the central characters provide a vivid picture of life as it unfolds; three caricatures for our identification; three different philosophies and ways of being.

The first one I want us to consider is the robber, the thief, the thug along the way to Jericho. Actually, Luke speaks in the plural - “a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among robbers” - so we know that there was more than one who lay in wait that day; more than one on watch for a victim of some variety to fall upon their unfortunate plan.

The philosophy of these robbers is plain. In a brief sentence it would be: **What’s yours is mine and I’ll take it.** These are those along life’s way who take what they want with little regard for others. They victimize people, sometimes in clever disguise, and they do it solely for

their own gain. They do it by ease if they can; but if not, they do it by brute force. They abscond with the belongings, the worth, even the lives of others.

It doesn't take much imagination to find this spirit in the world today. The example of the decade is Bernie Madoff, who, as you know, brought scads of people to ruinous consequence by a ponzi-scheme. **What's yours is mine and I'll take it!** But it can be seen, too, in the rampant greed made vivid in huge bonuses paid to a slight few while others suffer. Or, differently, it can be seen in corporate profits that pay no attention to tax-payer bailouts. But it can be seen, too, in the lesser moments of human life much closer, much more near, perhaps even in me – or I daresay, maybe in you, too.

The second philosophy in the parable is also ever-present in life. There are those who *could* have helped the victim in the story that day; those who *could* have made a critical difference, a healing contribution, a gesture of genuine human caring - but they opted out. These are, of all people in the story, a priest first and then a Levite – both of whom knew the scriptures and the law of the prophets. One might suppose that they were fine and upstanding in many ways. But each, in turn, intentionally crossed the road to get more distance and take a pass.

If we could ask their philosophy would be: **What's mine is mine and I'll keep it!** They have the resource to help, but don't want the responsibility. They possess the capacity to respond, but don't want the inconvenience. They could intervene, but do not give it the time of day.

What's mine is mine and I'll keep it! This may be the more difficult reflection in the parabolic mirror that Jesus gives us. I mean, I assume that we are not very much like the robbers and thugs – taking what belongs to another. We safely escape that identification. But in this second caricature we discover closer ground. Because all of us know times in life when we could have intervened, should have reached out, would have spoken up. And all of us are just a little bit, I suspect, like the person who once told me only partly in jest, “I'm not as concerned about the social ills of our time as I am about my own standard of living.”

And then third, I saved the best for last. A third caricature comes along in the most unlikely form. It's the Samaritan - the one who, in that day, bore the brunt of discrimination and distain, the one to be shunned and avoided, the one who was outcast and unworthy. And yet, he responded with the core ethic of Jesus which is of active compassion toward human need. His philosophy in a phrase, if we could ask, would be: **What's mine is yours and I'll share it!**

Margaret Mead helped the world understand so much about the development of human civilization. She was once asked: “Dr. Mead, with all of your knowledge of human life, the many cultures and different people that you have studied across time and place, what is the earliest sign of civilization that has been found? Is it a tool? A clay pot? A fishhook? A stone for grinding grain? A drawing on a rock?”

She answered, “The earliest sign of civilization has come from archeologists as they sift through the layers and dust of ancient communities. It is neither a clay pot or a fishhook, a grinding stone or a drawing. It is rather, a healed femur. No healed femurs are found among savages. Skulls crushed by clubs, yes. Temples pierced by arrows, yes. But no healed femurs. A healed

femur means that someone showed compassion. Someone had to care for the person with the broken leg while it healed.”³

Henri Nouwen said it like this: “Every human being has a great, yet often unknown, gift to care, to be compassionate, to become present to the other, to listen, to hear, and to receive. If that gift would be set free and made available, miracles could take place.”

Well, bring it all home with me now. Three philosophies in life, three ways of being: **what’s yours is mine and I’ll take it . . . what’s mine is mine and I’ll keep it . . . what’s mine is yours and I’ll share it.**

Please, may we learn the Christian art of choosing the better way! And may we do so in the name and spirit of the one who once said, “Go thou and do likewise!” Amen.

© Copyright 2010, Charles Geordie Campbell, all rights reserved.

¹ Robert and Gwynneth Wallace. Pilgrim’s Progress. United Church Publishing House, 1997, p. 50.

² Leander Keck, ed. The Interpreter’s Bible, Volume IX. Abington Press, 1995, p. 229.

³ R. Wayne Willis. P.S. God, Can You Fly? Westminster - John Knox, 2002, pp. 114-115.