

The Wrong Ones

Years ago, a seminary classmate of mine told me about his son who was badly injured while they were visiting a family member's farm. The injury was so serious that his son had to be evacuated by helicopter to a hospital in the nearest city. The friend told of driving, accompanied by his father-in-law, watching the helicopter in the distance and trying to follow, doing fairly well until they got to the city, when a combination of traffic and one way streets impeded their progress. They wound up in a depleted area of town, with my friend getting more and more frantic and confused. He told about seeing a group of African American men in their late teens clustered on a street corner. They looked somewhat menacing as they stared at my friend, but he didn't care. His father-in-law said, "You can't pull over and talk to them; they look like a gang. Keep going." But my friend was too desperate to be intimidated. He pulled over and rolled down the window. One of the young men approached the car and said suspiciously, "What do you want?" My friend said, "Did you see that helicopter? My son is in it. He's badly hurt, and they're taking him to the hospital. I've got to get to him and I don't know where I am." The rest of the group approached the car when they heard, conferred for a moment, then among themselves produced fairly specific directions to the hospital, which they explained carefully to my friend. As he pulled off frantically, he heard one of the guys shout, "Hey, mister! We'll pray for your son."

We find over and over again, in the folklore of many cultures, the recurring theme of the wrong people doing what we do not expect them to do, being what we do not expect them to be. How could a threatening-looking gang be relied on to guide a lost father and to pray for his son? That scenario could have come right out of a fairy tale. It's not just folklore, though, that carries this message. Union Presbyterian Seminary has a branch in Charlotte, and the dean there is a wonderful teacher named Tom Currie. Rev. Tom points out frequently that in the Christian sacred text, the people that

God uses to transform oppressive situations, and people for whom God's love is so freely offered, are so often the wrong ones. As we look at some examples today, let me begin with a disclaimer. The Bible is full of instructive, beautiful, tender, fascinating, unforgettable *stories*, and in order to be culturally literate in twenty-first century America, we need to be at least a little bit familiar with some of them. I've told you over the years that I stand as a friend of the Bible, and sometimes people are a little bit challenged by that. I've had people tell me they don't believe the stories; they're confident that the stories aren't "true", so they have little value. But these stories are not supposed to be history, or news reports, and the people who told them were not historians or reporters. They were artists—gifted artists—and what has survived of their efforts to pass on what they understood about the life of Jesus still richly and powerfully informs our own lives now, if only we look at the stories as art. When we do look at them as art, it's easy to recognize that wonderful irony: we are so often changed, released--in fact, *saved*--by the wrong ones.

This theme can be found early on, in the Old Testament. God chooses the oppressed, enslaved Jews to be God's people, when there were plenty of well to do, powerful, privileged Romans around. They're the ones who should have been the chosen people, the people of God. But that's not how the story gets told. God appears to Moses and says you're my guy; go to the pharaoh, get my chosen people out of slavery, and lead them to the Promised Land. Moses says I can't do that, I can't speak well, I don't know how, I don't want to. You've got to get somebody else. But God says I've got faith in you, I've got your back, you're the one. The wrong one, according to the evidence—according to Moses himself—and yet, exactly the one God chooses.

In the New Testament, we don't have to look far to find similar stories. The prodigal son, for example, that we've talked about here before: the boy insults his father, goes off to make a new life for himself, and screws up. When he can't take it any longer, he decides to go back, apologize, and ask to be a servant in his father's household. But that's not what happens. His father has been yearning for this brat, this bum of a son, watching for him ever since he left. His father sees him coming from a

long way off, and runs to him. This is the wrong son to arrange a big celebration for; this son doesn't deserve such joy. This son messed up badly. His brother, the elder son, the right one, resents him bitterly and seethes with anger at his father for being so happy to have the wrong son back. What we need to notice in this story is that the wrong one is able to receive this unconditional love that the father offers so joyfully. It's the right one who can't accept the love. While this right son is out fuming in the field, there's a fantastic celebration going on inside, full of an abundance of love, and the only thing keeping the right son from being wrapped in it is his own decision to stay away. His father goes out to him, just as he went out to his younger son returning, and says please come in; I want you to be with us. Whether the elder son, the right son, accepts the invitation or not isn't part of the story. That's what we have to work out for ourselves, especially when we are the right ones...the resentful, angry, right ones, turning our backs on the universal love that is offered so freely—offered to the wrong ones, as well as to us. And, as the story so beautifully teaches us, offered to us when we are the wrong ones.

Another story that provides us with much to consider in thinking about the wrong ones is the familiar story of the Good Samaritan: Luke 10:25-37

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

²⁵ Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷ 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." ²⁸ And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰ Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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.’³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’³⁷ He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

It helps to have some background here—this man going from Jerusalem to Jericho was presumably a Jew, and Jews and Samaritans despised each other. Jews were the people of God, and Samaritans were not only a mixed race, but also spiritually inferior. Jews and Samaritans would not have interacted voluntarily. Think of black people and white people in the rural South in the 1940s or 50s. So when robbers leave the traveler for dead in a ditch, we could expect that a priest, a man of God, would have helped him. But that didn’t happen. It would have required the priest to touch someone who was unclean, so he moved to the other side of the road. Next a Levite, a man who knew the law, saw the injured man, and he, too, moved to the other side of the road. Each of these right ones should have been the ones who came to the rescue of this helpless, bleeding man. And yet in Jesus’s story for the lawyer, it’s the wrong one, a Samaritan, who feels pity. It’s the wrong one who touches this wounded man, and that touch is so important in this story. The Samaritan’s compassion prevailed over the taboo against touching an unclean person, and the lawyer hearing the story would have felt the cultural impact of that choice. Remember, Jesus was a Jew and a revolutionary, so by telling this story to the lawyer, he was implying that in order to fulfill the law of the Old Testament, the law by which the Jews defined themselves as God’s chosen people, it might be necessary to step outside of the cultural and religious boundaries and do something radical.

From the time we were children, we have heard the phrase “Good Samaritan”, and we’ve heard various explanations about what that phrase means, and in general we believe this is a story that calls us to help people who are worse off than we are. It’s a story that challenges people who are above the line of privilege to do our duty, to extend ourselves, to step below the line and interact with the marginalized people that struggle there. We know what we’re supposed to do. We know how to be the right people. We take pride in recognizing our responsibility and fulfilling it. There’s another perspective in this story, though, as Tom Currie points out, another lens through which to view it.

Imagine this story—and remember, this *is* a story, not history, not a news report-- from the perspective of the man who was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Imagine what it must have felt like to him when the priest and the Levite saw him stripped and beaten and crossed over to the other side of the road. The right ones, the people he should have been able to rely on, walked away from him in his suffering and left him surely feeling betrayed and abandoned. Then on top of that, they put him in the position of having to *receive* help from a Samaritan, from one whom he despised. He had to lie injured and devastated in the presence of the wrong one, and he had to accept that wrong one's help and care. We know what it's like to give help, and we recognize when and how to do that. We make sure local food banks are well stocked, we go to places that have been ravaged by natural disasters and help with rebuilding, we volunteer, we donate blood. We believe that we are doing the work that our faith calls us to do as the right people, the privileged people, and that belief is appropriate. What we do not imagine is that from the perspective of the ones we do good for, we might be the wrong ones. What we don't often think about, what we don't have to think about, is how difficult it is to be the ones in need of help, and how difficult it is to receive help.

Thus the stories in the sacred text challenge us with perspectives that take us out of our accustomed roles. We know what it's like to help the wrong ones; we do that all the time as Unitarian Universalists. We're always looking out for disadvantaged people to help. What we may not experience very often is how it feels to be the ones in need of help, and how it might feel to have to receive that help from people we don't like very much. And we are surely challenged when we try to think of times and circumstances when we ourselves have *been* the wrong ones, and what that cost us spiritually.

One of my professors in seminary used to tell us that we were there to study and search the text until we found the good news in it—the gospel—so that then we could proclaim it. My colleague Tom Currie, whom I mentioned at the beginning, would say that these stories of the wrong ones are bursting with good news, and I would agree

with him. The good news is that the Universe, God, the Good, the One—whatever language you have for it—insists on bringing us together with the wrong ones over and over again, so that we can learn by helping them, caring for them, loving them, that we will be helped, cared for, loved even when we are the wrong ones. That is good news indeed.

And so may it be.