

THE ALCHEMY OF GRACE

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Why do you suppose it was the Samaritan and not the priest or the Levite who stopped to help the stricken man in Jesus' story? There are several possible answers to such a probing question.

The first one to come to mind is the most obvious: namely, that of these three human beings, the Samaritan was simply the bravest. The details of the parable would support this contention. When Jesus says that "a certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho", He was speaking quite literally, for if you know anything about the topography of that section of the world, Jerusalem is 2,300 feet above sea level, while Jericho is 1,300 feet below sea level. In a relatively short distance, you have this precipitous drop, which means that this roadway was very crooked indeed, and to make matters even worse, desert came up on either side. To this day, that particular stretch of road is known and "the Red or Bloody Way", because the kind of violence that

Jesus described has happened there over and over across the centuries. It was easy for thieves to ambush travelers and then quickly disappear through the desert. In Jesus' time the conventional wisdom was "you should never travel that particular road by yourself, and if by some reason you were constrained to do so, the one thing you would not want to do would be to stop and stoop over and put yourself in a defenseless position. Therefore, in all likelihood, as these three individuals made their way and saw the stricken man, they all experienced an initial rush of compassion, for we are made in the image of a caring God and our instincts are unfailingly sympathetic. However, in the case of the priest and Levite, something bigger than their compassion quickly overruled their feelings - fear cast out love; that is, they must have said to themselves: "How do we know that this man is not a decoy, or if we stop and stoop over, that the same thing that happened to him won't happen to us?" Therefore, fear won out, and in the words of the text "they passed by quickly on the other side." However, for some reason, the Samaritan was different. He was in touch with that sense of enoughness that we call courage so

that when he saw the scene and felt compassion, love proved greater than his fear, and he dared to risk doing what he could to help. I have observed many times from this pulpit that I think finally there are only two realities. There is love and there is fear. Fear is the suspicion that there is not enough. Love is the confidence that there is enough. And it makes all the difference in the world which of these you believe is the ultimate shape of things. It could well be that the Samaritan had rooted and grounded his life in the ultimacy of love and therefore, he alone was capable of responding. Of course no one can be dogmatic at this point, but if the differential was courage, there is a real lesson here for all of us to learn. I am not going to get very far in loving God or loving my neighbor or loving myself, for that matter, without the courage that is born of the faith that there is enough.

But another possibility might come from a very different differentiate. Perhaps the Samaritan was not under as much time pressure as the priest or Levite, and therefore was free to respond to the unanticipated. I have referred before to an

intriguing experiment conducted by an ethics professor at Princeton Theological Seminary several years ago. He was trying to ascertain what conditions affected people's capacities for love. He recruited fifteen members of a class to do an afternoon experience for extra credit. All fifteen reported to the classroom and each were handed envelopes with personalized instruction. Five of the class were told that they had exactly ten minutes to move from that place to a room on the other side of the campus. The instructions said: "You have absolutely no time to do anything else. If you loiter, you are surely to be late." The professor coded this group "the high-hurry group." Five other members of the class were handed instructions that said: "You have thirty minutes to get to this room on the other side of the campus. You have ample time, but do not be excessively wasteful." They were coded "the medium-hurry group." The last five were given instructions which said: "Anytime between now and five 'o clock this afternoon, if you will report on the other side of the campus, you will be told what to do." They were identified as "the low-hurry group." Unbeknown to any of these participants, the

professor had arranged for some drama students from Princeton to be positioned along the path they had to take simulating great human needfulness. One of them was lying face down as if he had had a seizure and was unconscious. Another was crying hysterically as if some terrible trauma was occurring. Another was wandering about as if he was having a psychotic episode. All fifteen of the participants had to walk right past these needy figures. The results of this experiment are significant indeed. None of "the high-hurry group" stopped. Two of "the medium-hurry group" stopped, and all five of "the low-hurry group" attempted to see what they could do to help. The point? - time pressure is a moral category. When we have so committed ourselves to responsibilities out ahead, we simply do not have time to respond to the unanticipated, and this could well be why the priest and Levite acted as they did. These first two were functionaries of the temple, remember. They had services to perform and schedules to keep, and it could be that though they were very pained at the sight of this stricken man, the agenda anxiety that drove their lives would not permit them to deviate from their schedule.

Perhaps the Samaritan was wiser in the way he balanced the limits and the gifts of his life. Perhaps he was one of those human beings who left margins of leisure because of the unpredictable nature of our human saga, and therefore not being driven by such pressure, he was free to respond spontaneously in that situation. Once again, no one can be dogmatic, but if this were the case, again it says something significant to us about our tendency to get too many irons in the fire and to give away too much of our future and thus diminish our capacity for surprise.

But there is a third possible answer here. It is not original with me. In fact, I first encountered it in the teachings of Professor Walter Wink of the Alban Seminary of New York. He says it was the Samaritan and not the priest and Levite because of the particular kind of Samaritan that this one might have been. You need to realize that the Samaritans are the racial half-breeds of first century Palestinian life. Whenever a Jewish person married a non-Jewish person and a child was born to such a mixed union, that child was designated a Samaritan. They were more like the mulatto in our southern culture than anything else. Across the

centuries, individuals who have this kind of background have often been the objects of tremendous prejudice and injustice. They do not belong to either dominate group and often find themselves isolated without any real support. This was the lot of most Samaritans in that culture, and because they were human beings like all the rest, they tended to respond in one of three ways. The great majority of Samaritans simply gave up in the face of such overwhelming prejudice and said: "What can I do, but creep to the sidelines and live out my life in quiet despair?" The smaller percentage of these people went to the opposite extreme and became radical revolutionaries. They were so incensed at the injustice of penalizing a person for something over which they had no control that they resolved to give back pain to the perpetrators of injustice. There are records in first century life of Samaritan uprisings against Jewish and Roman authorities, but the trouble was their numbers were so small that whenever they resorted to violence, they themselves were always the losers. There is a wise old Yiddish saying that if a chicken challenges an elephant to a fight, the chicken had better be agile. You do not provoke a great

mass of strength against you without running grave risks for your own safety. And the Samaritans always wound up being the chickens against the Jewish and Roman elephant, and they were more often than not decimated at the end. But there was a third group of ~~Americans~~, Professor Wink says, by far the least in number, who instead of giving up in despair or blowing up in rage, found a way to take their experiences of suffering and transmute them into compassion and a desire to heal. Professor Wink thinks the man in Jesus' parable may have been one of those unusual types. You see, he knew from his own experience what it was like to be beaten and left by the side of the road. The sight of that pathetic man was literally a parable of the Samaritan experience on the road of life. And somehow this one had allowed that pain to be transmuted into compassion, so he noticed this one that the other two people may not have seen so clearly. And not only noticed him, but responded to a desire in his heart to do something to alleviate that suffering; that is, his experience of injustice had evoked in him a desire to stop the awful cycle and to become part of the answer instead of part of the problem.

I repeat - no one can say for sure that this is the answer, but I find in Wink's suggestion an image of tremendous inspiration for my own dealings with life. As I look around this morning, there are very few of us in this room who have suffered the kind of historic injustice that Samaritans or black folk or the American Indian have suffered in our own time. And yet, while we have not been the object of great historic injustice, every adult in this room has undoubtedly experienced a great deal of pain for which there does not seem to be much rational explanation. If every story in this room could be told in fullness, we are all persons of sorrow. We are all persons acquainted with grief. At one time or another, we have all been beaten down by circumstances and feel like we are left bleeding and senseless by the side of the road. And the question is: how have we chosen to respond to our times of undeserved suffering? The temptation to despair, to giving up is always there. The impulse to get angry and to fight back is always right below the surface. But there is also a third way that I have chosen to call "the Alchemy of Grace"; that is, the deliberate intention to take

our wounds and allow them to make us more compassionate and more aware, rather than more despairing and more bitter. There is a way to transmute our pain into a desire to do something to alleviate others pain that is within our human reach, and I would say to you quite clearly this morning, of all the things I could do with my days and my nights, of all the achievements that speak to my deepest aspirations, here is an ultimate goal- I would like to be a wounded healer. Of all the things I can think of, this is the most appealing.

Father Henry Nowven is the one who has made that metaphor so widely known in the last two decades. It is based on an old rabbinic parable. People asked Elijah: "How will we know Messiah when He comes?" And Elijah answered: "You will know Him in two ways. First, He will be outside the city gates among the poor and the dispossessed and the diseased. And you will know Him because the Messiah will be the one Person out there Who is only tending one wound of His own at a time. Everybody else is totally engrossed in their pain. All they can think about is their own suffering. However, the Messiah is only working with one wound at

a time and says: "I am doing this, so if I am needed in behalf of another, I can quickly move to their aid." There is great depth to this particular image, because the one who would bless must faithfully tend his or her own wounds. There is no evading our own brokenness in the service of others, but for our woundedness to not become everything - for our woundedness to teach us the real meaning of pain and then inspire us to do something for the pain of others - that really is the shape of messianic healing that holds promise for the future.

How does one ever engage in such an alchemy? Well, for me, at least, the answer is the one you hear more from my lips than any other single truth and that is, when I choose to see life as a gift and not an entitlement, when I see my very aliveness as coming from Another and not something I have earned or deserved, out of that enormous sense of gift, I choose to take even the worst and find ways to use it for the best. I do not spend my days and nights saying "why me?", but ask rather "why not me?" and then turn to see how I can give to another as graciously as life itself has been given to me. The realization that life is gift is for me

the energy of this alchemy of grace, which brings me back to where this started - why do you suppose it was the Samaritan and not the priest or Levite who stopped to help the stricken man? Who can say, finally? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that of those three, he was the most courageous, the bravest. Love cast out his fear, rather than fear casting out his love. Then again, maybe he was not under as much time pressure as the other two. He was careful about how many irons he got in his fire. But perhaps, just perhaps, it was because he was a Samaritan and an unusual Samaritan in that. A man who had chosen to take the pain that had been inflicted upon him and transform him into a wounded healer. One who knew what it was to suffer and out of that chose to become a Reliever of suffering. I repeat - of all the things that I could become - wounded healer is a consummate ideal.