

Our gospel reading today is one of the most well-known stories in the Bible.

Remember, Jesus tells this story as a response to a question. He's engaged with a legal expert about eternal life and God's law. And they agree with each other: To live, "You must love the Most High God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." Then Luke tells us, "But the expert on the Law, seeking self-justification, pressed Jesus further: 'And just who is my neighbor?'"

Seeking self-justification.

[The word for justification here](#) has to do with defending the cause of, pleading for the innocence of. To acquit. To free. It's worth noting that the word is rarely used reflexively. Usually someone seeks to justify someone else. Or God justifies.

This person wants to defend his own case / plead for his own innocence / acquit himself / free himself. From what exactly?

[There is a whole theory in psychology about self-justification.](#) It comes into play when we experience cognitive dissonance, which is when our beliefs and behaviors are inconsistent, particularly when this inconsistency challenges our positive self-image or worldview. Cognitive dissonance is distressing, and humans work very hard to ease the discomfort, even anguish, it can cause.

Self-justification is one of the ways we try to do that, a defense against feeling badly about ourselves by convincing ourselves that we are not wrong. Self-justification is fueled by biased memories, revisionist history, and a distancing from disconfirming data; all lower culpability to the point where we actually believe that what we have convinced ourselves is true.

Self-justification is dangerous because it keeps us stuck where we are – We lose our ability to hear others' views. Our thinking is increasingly rigid. We cut ourselves off from opportunities for forgiveness or to start again. There is no room to learn or grow or change.

Jesus and the legal expert agree on what God calls us to do to truly live. But the expert seems to have done something or believes something that contradicts the law. And so he seeks to ease his discomfort with this question about who is my neighbor.

Jesus could have told a story where the high priest or lead legal expert helps a Samaritan along the road to Jericho. That would have set the right example, that we should care for our neighbors who are not like us. And would have done so with some cognitive consistency: look to the sources of authority you trust to know how to live.

But Jesus is not just providing a legal or moral lesson. Like so many of Jesus' teachings, he is pushing people's beliefs to the edge. Because God lives beyond any limits we try to impose. In a story meant to explain how to live out the Jewish law, it is a random, unnamed non-Jewish person who fulfills the law. This does not make sense. And it's not supposed to. In the disruption to this person's way of seeing the world, there is room for something new to take hold. And maybe it does: "Which of these three, *in your opinion*, was the neighbor to the traveler who fell in with the robbers?" The answer came, "The one who showed compassion."

This is life with God: it does not always make sense, but, like the Samaritan's healing actions, it does make us whole.

What is possible when we refrain from self-justification? And hold that discomfort? The Samaritan shows us that, with God's help, we are filled with compassion, coming alongside the suffering of another. If what marks self-justification is staying stuck, then the sign of compassion--this true connection and solidarity with one another--is that it spreads. It goes out wide in every connection; runs deep and aims high. There are no limits to compassion, until it makes all things one. Compassion, not self-justification, frees us. That is what the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus teaches us, is it not?

That's ultimately where Martin Luther King, Jr. landed with the story of the Good Samaritan. [King told his friend, Andrew Young](#), "Andy, I think the Good Samaritan is a great individual. I, of course, like and respect the Good Samaritan....but I don't want to be a Good Samaritan...[Y]ou see, Andy, I am tired of just picking up people along the Jericho Road one-at-a-time. I am tired of seeing people battered and bruised and bloody, injured and jumped on, along the Jericho Roads of life. This road is dangerous. I don't want to

pick up anyone else, along this Jericho Road. I want to fix... the Jericho Road. I want to pave the Jericho Road, add street lights to the Jericho Road; make the Jericho Road safe (for passage) for everybody.”

Compassion cannot be contained. If we let it move us like it moved the Samaritan, and King, and Jesus himself; if we let it move us, it will permeate beyond single encounters. Beyond our own desire to always be right (or our fear of being wrong). It will rebuild and renew. We will take on reviving the dangerous road to Jericho, together.

I cannot hear this story, imagine the violent scene on Jericho Road, and consider the legal expert’s mental gymnastics to avoid having to change his views without thinking of our current gun violence crisis in America. It is very easy for me to see the sin of self-justification in the arguments of those with whom I disagree. So, I try to adjust – imagine myself as the legal expert. I try to stay in this place of discomfort, though brilliantly outlining the errors of my enemies feels much more familiar and even productive.

And what I have noticed is, more than disagreements about gun reform, it is the despair of gun violence that causes me to move to self-justification. It’s something like this: Gun violence is so bad, that if I care about it, I cannot feel good. So I don’t know how to react when Phoebe makes a silly face or eats her first piece of pizza. When we celebrate the Eucharist and hope feels real again. There is tension and the jolt to choose one feeling, one reality. I will choose despair...for a while. And then I will justify pushing it out of my mind...until violence happens again. It’s so unhelpful. These fits and starts of our commitment to addressing gun violence leads nowhere in the long run. And, even if it makes sense to me, helps me feel consistent or right, it’s so untrue. Humans are complicated. The world is complicated. We must open ourselves to that, to all of it and to each other, as Christ did.

I’m reminded of [a story from poet Hanif Abdurraqib](#): “I was at a reading shortly after the election, and the poet (who was black) was reading gorgeous poems, which had some consistent and exciting flower imagery. A woman (who was white) behind me—who thought she was whispering to her neighbor—said ‘How can black people write about flowers at a time like this?’ I thought it was so absurd in a way that didn’t make me angry but made me curious. What is the black poet to be writing about ‘at a time like this’ if not to dissect the attractiveness of a flower—that which can arrive beautiful and then slowly

die right before our eyes? I thought flowers were the exact thing to write about at a time like this, so I began this series of poems, all with the same title[": How Can Black People Write about Flowers at a Time Like This?"]. We heard one of his poems from this series on Wear Orange Sunday. I'd like to share another one now:

dear reader, with our heels digging into the good
mud at a swamp's edge, you might tell me something
about the dandelion & how it is not a flower itself
but a plant made up of several small flowers at its crown
& lord knows I have been called by what I look like
more than I have been called by what I actually am &
I wish to return the favor for the purpose of this
exercise. which, too, is an attempt at fashioning
something pretty out of seeds refusing to make anything
worthwhile of their burial. size me up & skip whatever semantics arrive
to the tongue first. say: that boy he look like a hollowed-out grandfather
clock. he look like a million-dollar god with a two-cent
heaven. like all it takes is one kiss & before morning,
you could scatter his whole mind across a field.

Give to anti-gun violence organizations. Work for sensible gun law reforms. And, if you're like me, do not rush to soothe the cognitive dissonance – the confusing discomfort – that our lives contain despair and joy; pain and healing; death and life. Our need to be free from the pain of cognitive dissonance compromises our connection to reality and, as such, our neighbor. If we engage each other – engage life with God – focused on that need, we will close ourselves off from those who are not fooled by cheap comfort or false simplicity. Those who not only know God's love but who have the compassion to show it and shape it into poems and stories and policies and so much more, that we might encounter them and say, "Yes, this is the one who shows compassion." And then go, with God's help, to do likewise. May it be so. Amen.