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LOVE IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

My Happiness Bears No Relation to Happiness is the title of the groundbreaking biography of the poet Taha Muhammad Ali.¹ It is the first biography anyone has ever written of a Palestinian writer, in any language. Taha was born in 1931 in the beautiful Galilean village of Saffuriyya. During the war of 1948 he was forced to flee on foot with his family to Lebanon. A year later when they returned they discovered that Saffuriyya was one of the “418 Palestinian villages that Israel effectively erased.”² His family moved to Nazareth, where he operated a souvenir shop near Nazareth’s Church of the Annunciation for more than fifty years. Self-taught with only four years of formal education, Taha has become, in the opinion of the renowned American literary critic Eliot Weinberger, “perhaps the most accessible and delightful poet alive today.”

What makes the biography even more endearing is the author’s approach to all things Palestinian. Adina Hoffman is an American-born Jew who has lived in Jerusalem for much of her adult life. During her sojourn in Jerusalem she has witnessed the darkest days of relations between Palestinians and Israelis, and though she says her life in Jerusalem was not dramatically affected by the violence, she found herself shrinking inward, less eager to venture outward. After a close friend was killed by a Palestinian suicide bomber on a bus, she quit taking public transportation. She also quit talking politics with her Jewish friends, who she says, “converted their own fear into the most unapologetic racism.”³

In the midst of the violence and turmoil her husband had come to know Taha and had begun to translate his poetry into English. Within a month of the start of the Intifada they had published their first book of translations. She writes, “We must have known in some inchoate way then that bringing out such a book—of Arabic poems inspired by a bulldozed Palestinian village, translated by a trio of two Jews and a Muslim, all three of them Israeli citizens, as was the Palestinian poet himself—was, in its small way an act of protest.”⁴ It was love in all the wrong places.

As their relationship blossomed Taha’s life and poetry made Hoffman “realize that he had something profound to tell me about the place that I’d recently had such difficulty staring in the face.”⁵ It wasn’t long before she considered writing about Taha and his world. One of the questions she wanted to discover was, “How, despite everything that Taha has endured, does he manage to remain so alert and joyful? If he has been angry—and his poetry acknowledges that at times he has—he has not let his anger flare into hatred but has turned it into an art and a generosity of feeling that seem almost to defy history.”⁶ Adina’s portrait of Taha is a work of art as well. There is something extraordinary and beautiful when someone is able to look past national, racial and religious prejudices and extract the glorious humanity of an individual for all to see.

Last week we examined the debriefing session Jesus had with his disciples after they returned from their mission. They were exuberant with joy, having experienced the power and authority of ministering in Jesus’ name. Jesus validated their joy, but then redirected their focus to something far greater—an everlasting joy that comes from

their relationship with the heavenly Father. Having experienced such a moment, I would have wanted to be still, to sit and savor the significance of Jesus words. But right at the high point of the narrative, a lawyer breaks into their private conversation and seeks to put Jesus to the test with a theological question.

While this outsider intruding upon our “holy ground” would upset most of us, Jesus sees it as an opportunity to take the training of his disciples to a whole new level. In two rounds of dialogue, Jesus sets forth the radical edge of love in the kingdom of God.

I. What Shall I Do to Inherit Eternal Life? (Luke 10:25-28)

A. A test question

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25 ESV)

Luke’s presentation of an unnamed lawyer strikes a note of discord in the story. Earlier, in Luke 5:17, legal experts appeared in Galilee along with the Pharisees as religious “police” who had come to monitor Jesus’ faithfulness to the law. True to form, though the lawyer’s question seems innocent, his motives are anything but pure. As Kenneth Bailey points out, “In Middle Eastern traditional culture the teacher sits and the student stands to show respect for the teacher by standing to recite. But in this instance the lawyer stands in order to test the teacher.”⁷ His question, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” was a standard rabbinical question meaning, “What shall I do to have a share in the age to come?” (Dan 12:2).

B. A question for you

He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” (Luke 10:26)

Jesus redirects the lawyer’s question with one of his own to probe not merely his understanding of what the Scripture says, but how his challenger interprets what it says.

C. The answer

And 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.” (Luke 10:27)

The lawyer answers quoting the *Shema*, the very heart of Israel’s law: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut 6:5), and combines with it Leviticus 19:18, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” As Carroll notes, “The motive underlying the man’s approach may be suspect, but his knowledge is not.”⁸

D. The answer justified

And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.” (Luke 10:28)

Jesus justifies his answer and agrees with how he reads the law, for it corresponds exactly to what he taught in his Sermon on the Plain (6:20-49). But it is one thing to interpret the law correctly, and quite another to internalize it and *do* what it says. Jesus’ final word to this

legal expert is “do this and you will *live*.” This is the way to life that the Torah offered to all who would love God and their neighbor with their whole heart (Deut 30:15-20).

After the first round of dialogue, the lawyer has failed to uncover anything controversial or heretical in Jesus’ teaching. On the other hand, by returning the volley with a question of his own, Jesus has exposed the lawyer’s deception, forcing him to admit that he already knew the answer to his question. At the end of the first round the score is Lawyer: 0, Jesus: 1.

II. Who is My Neighbor? (Luke 10:29-37)

A. Personal justification

But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29)

The proud lawyer refuses to give up and issues a second challenge to “justify himself,” in the hopes of regaining the upper hand and maintaining the respect of others by his superior knowledge of the law. His question is aimed at the ambiguity in the commandment to love one’s neighbor. The law defined love for one’s neighbor as equivalent to love for fellow Israelites and “resident aliens” who embraced the Lord’s covenant with his people. But as Joel Green notes,

As a consequence of Hellenistic imperialism and Roman occupation, it could not be generally assumed in the first century of the Common Era that those dwelling among the people of Israel qualified as “neighbors.” Different attitudes toward these foreign intrusions developed into a fractured social context in which boundaries distinguished not only between Jew and Gentile but also between Jewish factions.⁹

The lawyer hopes that Jesus’ answer will expose his controversial view of extending love to one’s enemies. Or will he back down under pressure and condemn the same people the lawyer condemns? “So Jesus, just how far should love reach?” You can almost sense his delight thinking he has finally got Jesus backed up into a corner with no escape.

B. The power of the parable

Jesus responds to his question with a parable, typical of Jesus’ response when he was forced to confront opposition. On the surface, parables appear as innocuous stories of Jewish village life, but in actuality they are extremely subversive. Tom Wright says,

They seem designed, within the worldview of the Jewish village population of the time, as tools to break open the prevailing worldview and replace it with ones that were closely related but significantly adjusted at every point...Jesus was articulating a new way of understanding the fulfillment of Israel’s hope. He had radicalized the tradition.¹⁰

The power of the parable is its deceptive simplicity to draw you in unawares and then skillfully lead you to make judgments appropriate to the plot. At that moment the trap door is shut and you discover that the story is about you, and you are completely undone in the process. Bailey notes that the parable of the Samaritan “falls into seven scenes (seven being the perfect number) that follow a time-honored model older than the writing prophets. The climax is at the center, and the last three scenes are linked to the first three (in an inverted order).”¹¹

A Robbers: steal, injure, and leave man for dead

B Priest: sees, does nothing

C Levite: sees, does nothing

X Samaritan: sees and has compassion

C’ Treats wounds: the Levite’s failure

B’ Transports the man: the priest’s failure

A’ Spends money on him: compensates for the robbers

C. A priest and Levite’s refusal

Jesus replied, “A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. (Luke 10:30-32)

The parable opens with a certain man who is traveling down the treacherous road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Jerusalem is about 2500 feet above sea level, and the road to Jericho drops sharply, descending some 3400 feet in 24 kilometers to the Jordan rift valley below. The narrow road, flanked by steep cliffs, made for an ideal hangout for bandits who would prey upon vulnerable travelers.

The choice of opening, “a certain man,” constitutes a powerful rhetorical move on Jesus’ part. In light of the debate surrounding the reach of love, grounded in how one reads Leviticus 19, the impossibility of classifying this person as either friend or foe immediately subverts any interest in questions of this nature. Stripped of his clothes and left half-dead, the man’s anonymity through the story is insured; he is simply a human being, a neighbor indeed.¹²

What will happen to the man who fell among the robbers? Will another traveler come to his aid? As the suspense builds, our hopes are awakened by the appearance of another traveler, a priest, who probably has completed his duties in the temple and is returning to his home in Jericho. By chance or good fortune, he arrives on the scene just in the nick of time.

But our hopes are quickly dashed as we watch in horror as the priest comes upon the man, sees his condition, and quickly passes by on the other side. But then a second traveler arrives upon the scene, a Levite. Levites were responsible for the less important tasks in the temple, and he may have served as an assistant to the priest. The text suggests he takes a closer look at the place where the wounded man lay, but sadly he imitates the behavior of the priest and passes by on the other side. We are not told of their motives. The shocking truth is that they simply do nothing to help the man. The implication of two exemplary individuals refusing care is significant, as Darrel Bock explains, “it is a literary way to speak of a generalized condemnation of official Judaism. The lawyer, as a part of this group, would recognize this...Official, pious Judaism had two tries to respond and did not. The drama remains, ‘Who will love this dying man?’”¹³

D. A Samaritan’s compassion

“But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’” (Luke 10:33-35)

Everything changes when a third traveler happens upon the scene, a Samaritan. His appearance in the story is surprising and frightful. To a Jew, a Samaritan was a religious heretic, a social outcast and a political enemy. Given the failure of the priest and Levite to help the wounded man, the appearance of a Samaritan offered as much hope to a Jew as the son of a Taliban would to a wounded marine. Given the centuries long animosity and distrust between Jews and Samaritans, we expect the worst. Samaritans have already refused hospitality to Jesus’ emissaries, prompting two hotheaded disciples to

demand retaliation. If there is any life left in the man, the Samaritan will probably finish him off.

What happens next is shocking. Jesus slows the pace of the narrative dramatically to focus on the Samaritan's reaction to the man lying by the side of the road. Unlike the first two travelers, Jesus tells us what went on in his heart—"when he saw him, he had compassion." The verb "having compassion" (*splanchnizomai*) speaks of an empathy and pity that springs from the deepest parts of our anatomy. The noun (*splanchnon*) refers to the inward parts, or entrails. To have compassion is a visceral response of having your "guts" moved to such an extent that you spare no effort to give immediate attention to the person in need. The verb is only used in the gospels to describe Jesus' responses or "of the actions of key persons at turning points of three parables."¹⁴ This suggests that such "compassion" is divine, which makes the parable all the more scandalous, as Jesus uses the Samaritan as a model of what compassion does.

First is that *look* of compassion, which sees that beneath all the man-made exteriors of clothing, politics, race, nationality and religion there is a vulnerable human being, who is isolated, beaten, and bleeding; without another human being to come to his or her aid, they will not survive. What the Samaritan sees evokes a visceral response that catapults him into decisive action: *touching-binding-lifting-transporting-taking care of-sparing no expense*. While the robbers stripped him, he binds up his wounds; the robbers beat him, he pours oil and wine on his wounds; the robbers leave him half dead, he puts him on his own animal and takes him to an inn; the robbers rob him of his money, he spares no expense to care for the man, laying out several days' wages "upfront" to assure the innkeeper that he will take care of any additional expenses that may accrue. The Samaritan has become a paramedic, an ambulance driver, a hospital receptionist, a physician, a night nurse, and the insurance company that subsidizes all the medical costs from the ambulance fees to rehabilitation. In other words, *compassion* doesn't stop until the man is completely restored.

But there is more. Bailey astutely notes that the Samaritan is taking a huge risk "transporting the wounded man to an inn within Jewish territory. Such inns were found in villages, not in the wilderness...A Samaritan would not be safe in a Jewish town with a wounded Jew over the back of his riding animal."¹⁵ He very well could have paid with his life. Bailey explains how he has personally witnessed these grim realities in the Middle East.

E. The ultimate question

Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise." (Luke 10:36-37)

Jesus concludes the parable by forcing the lawyer to answer his original question. However he reframes it from "Who is my neighbor?" to "Which of these three...proved to be a neighbor?" Even the Torah expert must admit that it was "the one who showed him mercy," though he can't bring himself to say that unspeakable word, *Samaritan*. Jesus' final imperative reinforces the lawyer's conclusion with special emphasis on the necessity that he must *do* like the Samaritan. But the question is, can he? Can we?

So where does the parable leave us?

III. Love in All the Wrong Places

First of all, the parable completely nullifies the worldview of the priest, Levite and lawyer, whose privileged status was defined by

birthright and whose function was to distinguish clear boundaries between the clean and the unclean, including people. The issue of who is "in" and who is "out" has nothing to do with birthright, but on *doing*, a chord that has been struck three times in the text (vv. 25, 28, 37).

Second, the fact that the wounded man remains anonymous throughout the parable pushes the boundary of love for neighbors beyond family, nationality, race, and religion to the extreme limits of, yes, even our enemies. There must be no limits or boundaries to the extent of our love. The greatest threat to the advance of the kingdom of God is prejudice, especially the prejudice of the righteous that creates narrow circles of insulated look-alikes. The fact that the Levite quickly follows the pattern set by his master, the priest, is a painful reminder of how easily prejudice can infect a whole population by the example of their leaders, whether they are parent, pastor or president.

Third, and perhaps the most difficult pill to swallow is the suggestion that if we choose to follow Jesus, we must be open to the possibility that those we consider as outsiders or enemies of the gospel may in fact have more to teach us about love and compassion than what we display in church.

This week San Francisco celebrated the Supreme Court's ruling overturning California's ban on same sex marriage. As a Christian I see it as a violation of the sanctity of marriage and the appropriate expression of our sexuality. Others view it as a battle of civil rights for all human beings. Like many issues in the so-called "culture wars," lines have been violently drawn, dividing us into rigid groups based on our beliefs about sexuality, the role of government, even about who God is and how God created us. Here in 2013 we are playing out the very scene Jesus describes—Jew vs. Samaritan, those on the 'right' side of God's law and their enemies on the 'wrong' side. So this morning, I am challenged by Jesus to ask myself, "Can someone who is gay teach me about compassion?" When Jim Ziegler was stricken with ALS, his neighborhood showered Bunnie and Jim with an incredible outpouring of love and practical support. Bunnie shared with us that leading the neighborhood brigade was a gay couple who, like the Samaritan in our story, spared no effort to care for Jim and Bunnie, even crossing into what they surely felt was dangerous religious territory to tend to Jim and Bunnie's needs. The older I get the more I believe every human being has something to teach me. Some of my best mentors have been outside the faith.

Fourth, the question still remains: if what characterizes those who have a share in the age to come is a compassion that risks more than the law requires or ever expects, how then do you attain your share? It takes the rest of Luke's story to fully answer that question, but the parable is not without its clues.

Compassion is not something you can manufacture or imitate. It first must be received before it can be given. And the one who receives compassion in this story is the anonymous man who fell among robbers. That man is you.

You are the man or woman who, traveling through the dangerous road of life, fell victim to abandonment, sexual abuse, financial ruin or addiction. Perhaps like the man on the road, when you were most vulnerable and exposed, the church abandoned you. Ever since, you have been numb, like a walking corpse. But at some point, long after you had given up hope, you encounter another traveler who you think you know, but you really don't. When he sees you, he runs to you and looks at you with a look of love that shoots through your veins like fire. Overcome with pain you faint only to wake up the next day in the hospital surrounded by a team of loving care givers. After

two months of rehabilitation you check out, only to discover your Samaritan friend has already paid all your expenses. When you ask the nurse how to contact him, holding back her tears, she says that he took a second construction job to help pay your bills. Last Friday after making the final payment he was killed in a car accident.

The Samaritan is Jesus, who is making the journey from Jerusalem to Jericho looking for all the wounded along the way. In John's gospel the Jews become so outraged that his love embraced a woman caught in the act of adultery that they call him a demon possessed Samaritan (John 8:48). If you love with the abandon that Jesus did, I guarantee you will have enemies. But once his love has touched you, consumed you, it doesn't matter what people think. After all, Jesus loves them too.

"Samaritan love" is what propelled Adina Hoffman to cross national, political, racial and religious boundaries "to take on the serious study of both literary Arabic and the spoken Palestinian dialect"¹⁶ in order to get inside the heart and world of a Palestinian poet. How does one live through the trauma of losing his village, homeland, and countless family and friends, and emerge from that crucible with a love for life that she says is, in her experience, unrivalled. "He is neither bitter nor angry, but curious, ebullient, even joyous. More extraordinary still, he has managed to transform those devastating experiences into art of the very first order."¹⁷ In his poem "*Abd el-Hadi the Fool*"¹⁸ Taha seems as amazed by it as his biographer. The poem opens with brutal honesty, articulating the many ways hatred drove him to thirst for revenge.

Before the dough of my skull was ravaged,
by the buzzards of the world,
I was a fool!
I was naïve...
and wanted to fly.

But after the rape
of the light of morning's laughter,
suddenly,
hatred filled me.
After the springs were buried alive,
after the watercourses' destruction,
the flame swept through me.
After the pillaging of the shadow
and the sundering of the spikes of wheat...
after the murder of the doves...

I wanted to burn down the world!
Wanted to stab it
in its soft belly,
and see it dismembered
after I drowned it.

And yet, in the midst of this unspeakable darkness, feelings of warmth and tenderness emerge that defy belief and assert themselves with such force that his rage is simply undone. The only way to articulate these two emotional extremes that coexisted inside him was to give the latter a name outside of himself, "Abd el-Hadi the fool!"

However,
my great apostasy is this:
no sooner does the laughter
of a child reach me,
or I happen upon
a sobbing stream,
no sooner do I see
a flower wilting,
or notice a fine-looking woman,

that I'm stunned
and abandoned by everything,
and nothing of me remains
except
Abd el-Hadi the Fool!

Abd el-Hadi
who gets on my anger's nerves
as he lights the fuse of my folly,
as he unfurls his warm smile,
embracing that very same world!
He shakes hands with creatures of various sorts
embraces the righteous and the wicked alike,
greet the victim and hangman as one,
The Fool!
He hugs the world like pillow;
he hugs the world as though it were
the memory of his own engagement...
or a breeze across a field of wheat!
he takes the world to the hair of his chest
like his daughter...
without there appearing on his face
any indication at all
that he's bothered
by the sobbing of tears
pouring from the sockets of his eyes!

1. Adina Hoffman, *My Happiness Bears No Relation to Happiness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 7.

2. *Ibid.*, 13.

3. *Ibid.*, 5.

4. *Ibid.*, 6.

5. *Ibid.*, 6.

6. *Ibid.*, 9.

7. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 286.

8. John T. Carroll, *Luke, A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 244.

9. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 429.

10. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 175-176.

11. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 290.

12. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 429.

13. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke Volume 2:9:51-24:53* (ECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1031.

14. H. H. Esser, "splachnizomai," NIDNTT 2:599.

15. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 295.

16. Hoffman, *My Happiness Bears No Relation to Happiness*, 13.

17. Jonathan Mok, "My Happiness Bears No Relation to Happiness: an interview and review," posted June 1, 2009. Global Comment; <http://globalcomment.com/my-happiness-bears-no-relation-to-happiness-an-interview-and-review>

18. Taha Muhammad Ali, *New & Selected Poems, 1971-2005* (trans. Peter Cole, Yahya Hijazi and Gabriel Levin: Copper Canyon Press, 2006), 128-135.