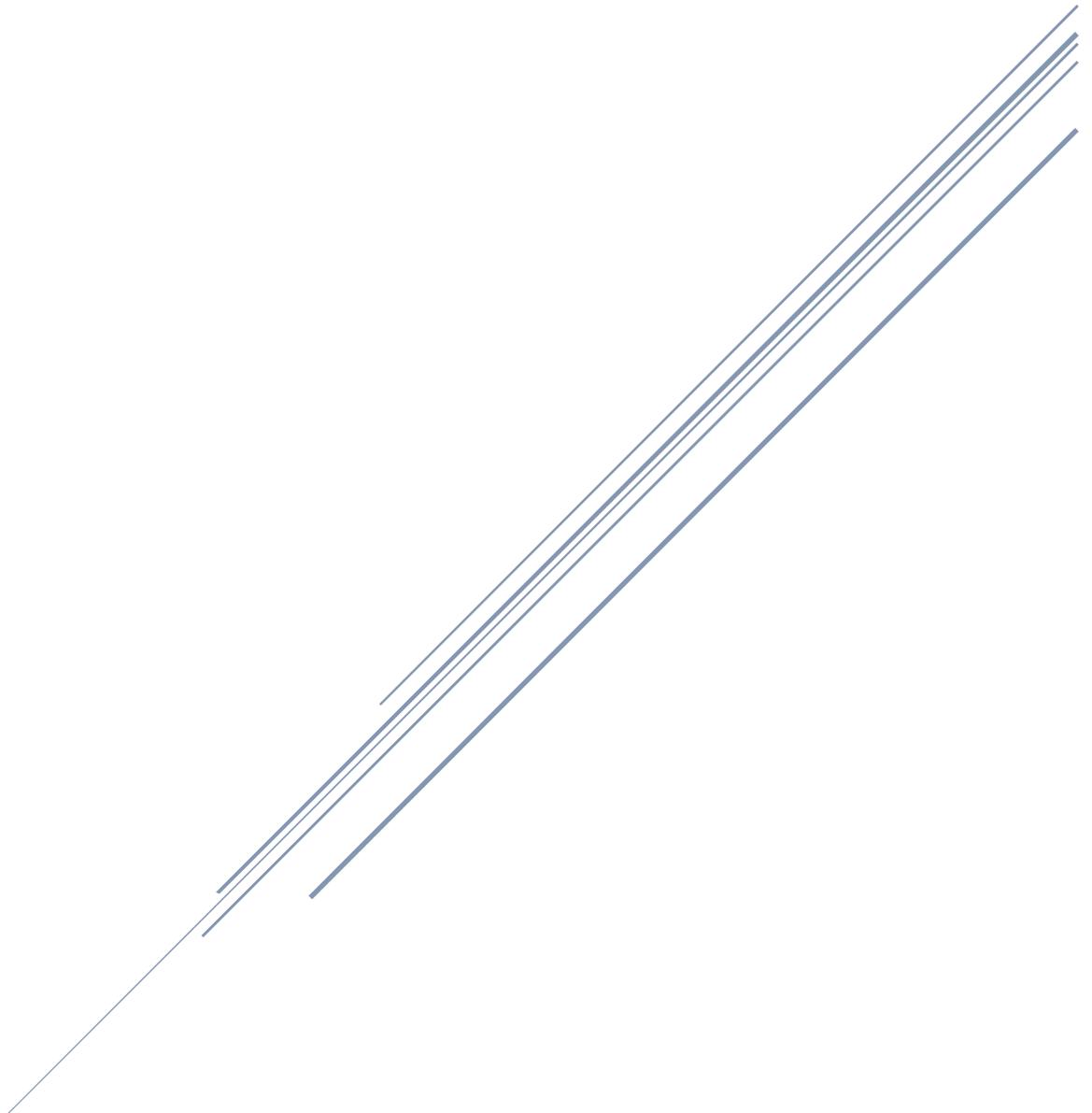


DO THIS AND YOU WILL LIVE

By Barbara Brown Taylor

Luke 10:25-37



July 10, 2016
BCUMC/CCUMC/TCUMC

Do This and You Will Live by Barbara Brown Taylor (*Luke 10:25-37*)

If it's still possible for us to be moved by stories we have heard more times than we can count, and to preach those same stories to people who know every word of them by heart—then it's because we're followers of the Word Made Flesh—the Living Word—who never sounds exactly the same way twice.

Ask *Marcela (Brigitta)* to tell the story and it comes out in her own accent, scented with her own breath. When she's telling it, all the characters sound like her. Ask *Richard Lyon* to tell the story and it comes out with more chin and drama to it, though just as true. Ask someone who got beat up in a shelter last night to tell it and you'll hear things in the story that you won't hear if you ask a lawyer to tell it. Ask a rabbi to tell it and you may be able to hear what a rabbinic story it really is.

I suppose it's possible to register all of these differences as ways in which humans put their own limits on the limitless Word of God. Who isn't above wanting God to speak in our own language?

But I think it's also possible that this is how the Word is meant to work—not sitting in 12-point font at room temperature on a clean, white page but circulating through the heated blood and guts of living human beings.

Of course that makes it just about impossible to arrive at one set meaning that everyone can agree on, but it does keep the Word alive. As each teller tells the story, the word becomes flesh again, inspiring new hearers to raise new questions about how to embody that word in the world.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” That's the lawyer's question. It's a “do” question, not a “be” question, nor even a “believe” question. The lawyer has never heard of the Sinner's Prayer. Like Jesus, he has been raised on Torah, which is about how to live, not what to believe. His question concerns practice and not belief. He wants Jesus to tell him in plain language what kind of life he should be living now in order to

live in God's presence forevermore. It's a good question, even if it is a test. You'd like to know the answer, wouldn't you?

Well, you've come to the wrong rabbi, because the only answer that interests Jesus is the lawyer's own. "What is written in the law?" Jesus asks him. "What do you read there?"

Woody Allen: Why does a rabbi always answer a question with a question?

Rabbi: Why shouldn't a rabbi always answer a question with a question?

Jesus and the lawyer both know what is written in the law. Either one of them could look it up, but the Word Made Flesh doesn't want chapter and verse. He wants to hear the living word come out of the lawyer's own mouth.

"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," the lawyer says, "and your neighbor as yourself."

In Luke's gospel, it's the lawyer who gets to give the summary of the law, not Jesus. Jesus just stands there quietly, waiting to hear what the lawyer has to say. It's almost as if Luke is standing behind each of them with a sign on a stick. The sign over the lawyer's head says, "The Word." The sign over Jesus' head says, "Made Flesh."

Here's how it sounds. ... Here's how it acts.

Meanwhile, the lawyer's answer is almost chapter and verse, but inventive—two pieces of Torah scotch-taped together--the lawyer's own speech-act, his own voicing of his tradition. And Jesus likes it very much. It's almost word for word what He said in the Gospel of Mark.

"You have given the right answer," Jesus says to him; "do this, and you will live."

It's not unkind, but it's a sucker punch all the same—a way of letting the lawyer know that getting the words right is not the same thing as giving them flesh. Answers

weigh about as much as the breath it takes to expel them. Like helium balloons, they come out of the mouth and float away, leaving no footprints anywhere on the ground.

A right answer has never picked up a frightened child, or put an ice chip in the mouth of a dying friend. A right answer has never written a check to the Red Cross, or pried up stinking linoleum from a kitchen floor in the ninth ward of New Orleans. A right answer has never even showed up at the polls to vote on election day, or taken to the streets in peaceful protest. It kind of makes you wonder why religious people spend so much time vetting each other on right answers, when the truth is that a right answer alone never changed a thing.

“You have given the right answer,” Jesus says to the lawyer; “do this, and you will live.”

Here is a Great Commission that is at least as compelling as the other one that we refer to by that name. Do love. Don't just think love, say love, have faith in love, or believe that God is love. Give up the idea that your ideas alone can save you. If you know the right words, then bring those words to life by giving them your own flesh. Put them into practice. Do love, and you will live.

I know, I know. Works righteousness, salvation by faith alone. I know, I know, but according to Luke, Jesus still said it, and if that makes him a not very good Protestant then I guess we're going to have to live with it.

Alternatively, we could ask him to clarify his terms: What do you mean by “do”? Is the living conditional on the doing, or is the doing a grateful response to the promise of eternal life? The loving God part is clear enough, thanks to the immutability of divine being, but in an increasingly global neighborhood, what does “neighbor” mean? Does it stop with the people in the house across the street or does it mean everyone in my zip code? In the world? In my consciousness? Who is my neighbor, anyway?

You see how true these stories really are.

Please note that everyone in the story at hand—everyone, that is, but the half dead man—belongs to an identifiable subculture. The priest, the Levite and the Samaritan are all referred to by the names of their respective groups, which are set apart from one another by profession, by tribe, by class, and by ideology. The Levite is lower than the priest in the Jerusalem temple hierarchy. The Samaritan is at odds with both of them, thanks to an historic hostility between Jews and Samaritans that runs both ways.

In the chapter just before this one, a Samaritan village refused hospitality to Jesus and his disciples because Jesus' face was "set toward Jerusalem" and not toward Mount Gerazim, where the Samaritans kept their sanctuary.

Even the innkeeper belongs to a subgroup that sets him apart from the others. The only people who stay at the inn on Jericho Road are people whose own families won't take them in. Because they have done whatever it's they have done, they don't have any friends either, so they have to rent beds instead--nasty beds, where it's best not think about who did what there last night. By changing his paying guests' linen and emptying their chamber pots, the innkeeper sinks even lower than they. Everyone in this story knows his place.

Only the half dead man is a cipher. He can't talk, so we don't know what language he speaks. He isn't identified with a group, so we don't know what his loyalties are. All we know is that he has been robbed, stripped, beaten and left for dead—the only person in the story with whom everyone else comes in contact. Or with whom two come in contact, at least—the Samaritan and eventually the innkeeper. The other two keep their distance, for reasons that may range from their wish to maintain ritual purity to their fear that the man on the ground may be a robber himself, counting on their sympathy to play a dirty trick.

Jesus doesn't go into their reasons because their reasons don't matter. All that matters in this story is what they do, which is to see the man and pass him by. You can count the verbs yourself—see, and pass by--two verbs each for the priest and the Levite.

Whatever else they think, say, have faith in or believe, this is what they actually do. Turn the sound down and you can see how much good right answers do.

Likewise the Samaritan. He belongs to a group that has its own right answers about how to read Torah, where God's real temple is, and who the bearers of the true faith really are. But once again, right answers don't show up in this story; only right actions do--and this is where the Samaritan shines. He comes near the man, sees him, is moved by him, goes to him, and bandages his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. He puts the man on his animal, brings him to an inn, takes care of him, takes money out of his pocket and gives it to the innkeeper, and asks the innkeeper to take care of the half dead man, saying that he will come back and repay whatever more the innkeeper spends. That's a whopping fourteen verbs for the Samaritan, in whom God's word becomes flesh.

“You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

So does God count verbs? Maybe. I hope not. That doesn't sound like God. But it's hard to get around the suggestion that God does care about bodies--about how we treat one another's bodies--and that any right answer about divine reality that does not translate into bodily care for the neighbor is of limited use or interest to God.

Plus, there is only one verb in this story that leads to all the rest, the one thing the Samaritan does that sets him apart from his two predecessors so that everything else can happen.

He comes near the man.

If there are moral or physical dangers involved, the Samaritan ignores them. If there are ancient hostilities between their people, the Samaritan disregards them. If there are great gaps between their understandings of God that might cause them to begin arguing with one another the moment the half-dead man comes to, the Samaritan figures he'll deal with that later. He comes near the man, which is what puts him in the half-dead man's neighborhood. He comes near enough to see him, near enough to be moved with pity for him, near enough to show him mercy.

“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

You know the right answer, because you have heard the story more times than you can count. But if you too wish to know what you must do to inherit eternal life, the answer becomes flesh right here: Come near. It’s what God does in Christ. It’s where the kingdom is—so near. Coming near is God’s specialty act, from which all other verbs flow.

Come near. It’s a peculiar Christian practice, but there it’s, easily as biblical as fasting or prayer. No one will do it exactly the same way twice. When **Marcela/Brigitta** comes near, the breeze she brings will smell like her.

When **Richard** does it, it will have more chin and muscle in it, but he’ll still be right there. If you want to do love, then by all means fast, pray, study God’s word, give to all who ask of you, work for justice and peace.

And come near--near enough to see, near enough to feel, near enough to recognize a neighbor in someone who needs a neighbor bad – near enough to get your hands dirty.

Do this and you will live, Jesus says. Throw your body into it and you may even find that your question about eternal life is not such a burning question for you anymore—because the minute God’s word becomes flesh in you, heaven is where you are.