

Power Play
A Sermon for Every Sunday
The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
Luke 10: 25-37

Lawyers! It's always the lawyers, isn't it? Today we read a passage the gospel of Luke and we find that it's a lawyer who's stirring up trouble for Jesus. Again.

Try to imagine the scene. Jesus, at this point in the story a popular, dynamic young rabbi, is teaching the Torah, religious law, to the rapt attention of increasingly large crowds of people. A lawyer in the crowd asked Jesus to offer a rabbinical opinion about Torah, to help him distill religious law in the detailed and intricate way that lawyers like to do.

In point of fact, an interplay like this one was a common occurrence in the society of Jesus' day: this is how the powerful, elite, professional, educated folks interacted with each other, a sort of unwritten societal standard not unlike any big city cocktail hour when, upon meeting someone for the first time you immediately know to ask: "What do you do?"

The lawyer was certainly interested in Jesus; Jesus had been generating a lot of buzz all over the countryside. Some of the things he was saying and doing were edgy, strange, different. The lawyer wanted to engage him a sort of intellectual swordplay, where they'd spar with each other over questions of merit and importance. It was an exercise in finding your place in the grand order of things; trying to figure out who this Jesus guy was and whether he was really rising in the ranks of Jerusalem power brokers like many suspected and, if so, to make sure they knew each other.

So this is how the scene unfolds, two educated Jewish men, playing the professional games we all play....

I tweeted two weeks ago after I arrived at the convention center in Greensboro, North Carolina for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly meeting: “I’d know I was at a Baptist meeting even if I didn’t know I was at a Baptist meeting.”

For one thing, all the men were wearing pleated khaki pants and polo shirts, the unofficial Baptist male uniform. The lobby of the hotel was full of fresh-faced, earnest looking people wearing nametags and clutching tote bags—sure signs that something Baptist is going on.

As I sat in the lobby waiting for a friend, I watched. People would greet each other by name (after glancing quickly at nametags to spark memory). They’d ask each other questions like, “How are things going at First Baptist?,” to which there would be cheery answers about new programming and increased worship attendance. People traded business cards and made connections and caught up on all the news. You know, it’s what we DO at church meetings, and we all know how to do it.

The lawyer testing Jesus was just doing what educated men of that day did, you know, professional posturing. But he had a surprise in store for him, because Jesus was not your average young rabbi. Jesus regularly and consistently took generally accepted assumptions about power and influence and turned them upside down leaving all the folks who thought they understood puzzled, scratching their heads in confusion.

What’s notable today is that our gospel lesson comes from Luke chapter 10, perhaps the most familiar and popular chapter in Luke’s gospel, where Jesus tells the most famous parable of all, the Parable of the Good Samaritan. You know the story; I know you do.

A lawyer challenges Jesus, asking for exact instructions about how he might attain eternal life. True to form, Jesus answers the lawyer's question with a question of his own. The lawyer, of course, already knows the answer. So he shows Jesus he knows the answer: the way to attain eternal life—to win in the end—is to follow the two most important commandments, love God and love your neighbor.

Okay then.

But, you know lawyers. This one follows up with another question. He wants to spar some more with Jesus, to test him and see if he's really got the chops to make it in upwardly mobile Jerusalem society: "And who is my neighbor?"

And so, as he typically did, Jesus tells a story. You know this story as well as I do; here's the way we often hear it told:

There was a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. This was a particularly treacherous stretch of land, a road you should never travel along because of bands of robbers who regularly attacked travelers. Such had happened to this man, who was beaten severely, robbed of everything he owned, and left by the side of the road to die.

Along the road came a priest, who was traveling the same way. The priest was really important in society; part of the very elite class of temple staff. The lawyer listening to Jesus would have known that this guy was a power broker; really important; elaborate-motorcade-making-me-late-to-an-appointment important. The priest saw the hurt man, crossed the road to the other side, and passed by without stopping to help.

Next came a Levite. Levites were also part of temple leadership. Levites assisted the priests in the work of the temple, and were born into their calling. Maybe the Levite wouldn't have had a whole motorcade, but he fell

into the power hierarchy somewhere near the top; you'd notice him in a restaurant, in other words. And so, Jesus tells us, the Levite also sees the hurt man, crosses over to the other side of the road, and passes on by. He wasn't quite as important as the priest, but I think I always learned he was in a hurry—he had things to attend to at the temple and so he didn't stop. Too preoccupied and self involved.

Then comes a Samaritan man along the road. Well, the lawyer listening to Jesus could immediately understand the contrast here. While a priest was as high as you could go in Jewish society, a Samaritan was on the opposite end of that spectrum.

Just a little bit of Jewish history: by time Jesus and the lawyer were doing their little intellectual sparring, Jews and Samaritans had hated each other for over a thousand years. When King Solomon died the monarchy broke into two factions: the ten tribes of the North rebelled and founded a capital in the city of Samaria. The two southern tribes made their capital in Jerusalem. There was long-held ethnic hostility and political and religious rivalry between Jews and Samaritans. So when Jesus said "Samaritan" the lawyer immediately knew where that man fell in the ranks of power.

Well, you know what happened. The Samaritan stopped and helped the wounded man; bandaged him and took him to safety; provided for him until he was fully healed. The Samaritan was the good guy.

And the way we've always heard this story interpreted is this: the lawyer asked "who is my neighbor?"—let me get exactly clear what I have to do, who I have to help.

And the answer we've always heard from this story is that the hurt man on the side of the road is our neighbor, of course. We should always go

out of our way to help anybody who needs help, no matter who they are. The Samaritan demonstrates this.

And this of course is a very nice way to interpret this parable, one that I am sure Jesus would have taught had he been the kind of teacher whose main objective was to leave us with a nice morality tale that makes us feel guilty when the guy at the stop light knocks on the car door window asking for money and we pretend like we don't see him while willing the light to change.

But let's look again. It's always tricky to hear a beloved and oft-told passage of scripture; we assume we know what it means. But we should always be sure to listen again, carefully, because we don't want to mistake familiarity for understanding.

There was a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Bad idea to travel all alone and you know what happened. Cut to: lying broken and bleeding on the side of the road.

Along comes a priest, who sees the man and crosses the road to the other side, then hurries along.

Well, of COURSE he does. He's a priest; he has people waiting for him at the temple. His presence and service are indispensable there, and to touch someone hurt and bleeding would mean he was unclean and unable to perform his work. He couldn't stop; his obligations to God meant he had to pass on by and hope the man got some help soon. Same with the Levite. Holy, powerful, pulled by the obligations of his position and power. He couldn't stop either.

I don't think it's fair to label the priest and the Levite shady, power hungry and selfish people. They passed on by, but they may very well

have passed on by regretful that their obligations at the temple prevented them from stopping.

Regardless, it was the Samaritan, the one of the three who was decidedly Unholy, with no power in society to speak of. For whatever reason he had the time and the impetus to stop and help. And he did.

Jesus asks the lawyer: three men, two powerful and holy; one an outsider. Who's the neighbor?

The lawyer has to admit: it's the Samaritan.

But that wasn't the question. The lawyer had asked: who is my neighbor? Jesus' story in answer challenged: who is being a neighbor? And this is exactly how Jesus turns this parable on its head, showing us a different expression of power.

In answer to the lawyer's question Jesus didn't take out a paper and pencil and list: the homeless guy on the street corner, the person with the flat tire, the checker at WalMart, the college student with nowhere to stay for Thanksgiving, so the lawyer could check them off one by one and meet the legal requirements for heaven.

Jesus doesn't answer the lawyer's question at all. Instead, Jesus asks a different question: are you ready to BE a neighbor?

As usual, Jesus completely reframes the conversation. For the lawyer standing there that day having a scholarly conversation with a young, up and coming rabbi, the theoretical questions he posed were about religion and rules.

But Jesus' story about powerful and holy people doing what they thought was right alongside a societal outcast who actually *did* what was right sends an upside down message to the powerful lawyer in search of his

next step up the social ladder: Do you think you're powerful because you follow the rules? If you do, you're headed down the wrong path.

True power comes from a faith that animates our lives and transforms our hearts; it's not about who you are on the power grid of human life. It's about the power of sacrificial love that knows that outward trappings of power mean very little; it's inner transformation that results in radical actions of love that seem to all the respectable people...well...a little strange.

True power doesn't come from your professional label, your societal position, your "power" in the world. He thought he, a powerful lawyer, was having a theoretical discussion with a powerful rabbi, where they could come to some understanding about the rules. But Jesus changed the question, switched the paradigm, and described a world in which the people who looked powerful on the outside were distracted by outward expectations and human constructs...while the pitiful societal outcast was the real powerhouse.

Who is my neighbor? Could I have a list? Yeah, not so important.
How do I be a neighbor? Now that's a better question.

I tried to imagine how this scene might play out in our big and powerful city. It would certainly have to happen at a cocktail party, don't you think?

Maybe you'd notice Jesus, over near the bar, surrounded by people drawn into the charismatic manner in which he's speaking. So you sidle up to the bar and order a drink, then kind of push your way through the crowd. You see a few friends and associates, pass out a couple business cards, until you get into his line of sight.

Wow, he really is compelling.

And then he starts talking to you! The conversation begins with the typical question, of course, “What do YOU do?” and it progresses from there. You can tell: this guy is really smart; he seems to have a unique take on the pressing political and social issues of our day.

Wanting to be sure you make a good impression—just in case you need him as a contact in the future—you toss out a question like: “Hey Jesus, what kind of legislation do you think we need to pass to address the racial and social injustices in society today?”

You’re listening intently; you stick your hand in your pocket and press the voice recorder on your iphone so you’re sure to remember what he says.

And Jesus pauses for a minute, swirls his drink, and replies: “On the night of February 26, 2012, in Sanford, Florida, a young high school student wearing a black hoodie to ward off the falling rain, walked down the street to a convenience store to buy some Skittles...”.

People Are Watching

Luke 14:1; 7-14

When I was in seminary I had a professor who taught us a lesson about hospitality that I will never forget.

Some of you may know that I went to seminary in Europe with Baptists from all over the world. Occasionally we would travel for study trips into areas of Eastern Europe that had been cut off from the Western world for generations. In the tiny homes of Eastern European Baptists, homes with no indoor plumbing and little evidence of the kind of opulence with which we live, I—a total stranger—was welcomed in and offered the kind of hospitality that, obviously, cost these folks significantly.

This was a little strange for someone like me, enculturated in a world of Martha Stewart Living and scented guest soaps. And I think my professor knew some of us would be shocked the first time our class took a trip, so before we left on our first adventure, he told our class a story about an experience he'd had.

Over the course of his career, this professor traveled often into remote and dangerous areas that Westerners didn't often risk; this was before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Once he took a trip to a remote region of Romania to visit a small Baptist community. When he arrived he was shown to the home of the pastor and his wife, where he would stay during his visit. When the pastor showed him where he'd be sleeping and let him get settled, my professor noticed he had been given the biggest room in the house, the one with a double bed. Since the pastor and his wife had a rather large family, my professor knew this was a burden to them all and he protested that the room and the bed were too much.

But the pastor and his wife were appalled. They insisted that it was their honor to offer him the best room and the best bed in the house.

So the family served my professor a warm meal, showed him where the outhouse was, and gave him some water for washing. Then, tired from his traveling, he said goodnight and went to the room they'd prepared for him. He washed, changed into his pajamas and got into bed, where he quickly fell asleep.

It was a few hours later that his sleep was interrupted, when the pastor and his wife came quietly into the room, changed into their pajamas, and climbed right into bed . . . with him.

All night long he lay there, smushed in between the pastor and his wife, wide awake. This, my friends, is true hospitality.

Today Jesus has a lesson for us on hospitality...and a whole lot more. Jesus had been invited to dinner at the home of a leader of the Pharisees; that's code for: super important guy. Jesus arrived at the dinner and began to watch what was going on. As people took their places at the table, he noticed them jockeying for positions. Everybody knew their place, based on their social status, and as they assembled at dinner a very clear power dynamic was playing out. As he watched all of this unfolding, Jesus, who obviously was never taught that you shouldn't discuss religion or politics at a dinner party, decides to speak up. Imagine the scene; as everyone is getting settled, Jesus says something like: "It occurs to me that if you were to attend, say hypothetically, a wedding banquet, instead of trying to get the best spot at the table that you can, it would be better to come in and take the place with the lowest honor. That way, you won't be

embarrassed if you have to move when someone more important comes in. It's just smart strategy: you'll have nowhere to go but up!"

Well, you can imagine that everyone was squirming at the discomfort of Jesus' comments, but then it got even worse.

Jesus turned to the leader of the Pharisees, the host, and said directly and loudly enough for everyone to hear: "You know, I think it's a good policy not to invite just people you like when you throw a dinner party; I feel like it's so obvious when you do that that you're just trying to get a return invitation. I think whenever you throw a party you should make a point to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind."

You know everybody there scanned the room quickly just to confirm what they already knew: that there was not one poor, crippled, lame or blind person there. And as we'd expect, some in the group shuffled their feet; a few coughed; several were looking down at their plates silent; and somebody stood up and said, "I need to visit the restroom; don't talk about anything interesting while I'm gone...!"

In the middle of all that tension, Jesus ties up each saying with a sort of proverb—some moral advice about being humble and helping people who can't repay you, but you and I are left scratching our heads, trying to figure out exactly what Jesus' point was, and why he decided at just that moment to give a few lessons about hospitality.

If you think when you hear this text, as I did at first, that Jesus sounds a bit like "a progressive Miss Manners," that's okay.^[1] We modern folk are a bit clueless when we read this text because our concept of hospitality is different from what it was in Jesus' day.

Hospitality to us is about creating a nice space where guests, preferably not family members, can come for a little while to visit us and be suitably impressed with our guest accommodations or magazine-worthy table settings. We want to have a good time, of course, and we want our guests to feel comfortable.

And then we want them to go home.

But hospitality in Jesus' day was a completely different thing. A dinner party like this in the society in which Jesus lived was a vehicle for enforcing the social code in a culture where your status—where you fall in the pecking order—determined some very critical matters: your income, your profession, your health, your chances at marrying well, your power. Not surprisingly, what seems like advice from Jesus on how to be welcoming at a dinner party is something much, much more revolutionary than that.

It would be good to note that by the time Jesus got to dinner he was already in a little bit of trouble. Recall the passage from last week, where he was teaching in the temple on the Sabbath when he noticed a woman who needed healing. When he healed her, the temple leaders were outraged that he would break Sabbath rules and they started complaining about him to the crowd. Jesus went on to reprimand the temple leaders for their hypocrisy... and then he got to preaching!

He preached about mustard seeds...and yeast...and a narrow door, all of his parables describing in different ways what he always seemed to be talking about this concept called: the kingdom of God. God's hope for the whole world, in which we live together in peace, with justice, showing what could happen in human community when we made it a point to love God and love our neighbors. So you can see how Luke chapter 14,

immediately following Jesus' fire and brimstone preaching in the temple, would begin with a verse that reads: "[W]hen Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely."

That's when it gets worse. You'll note that today's reading skips over five verses that tell us about an incident that happened just on the way to dinner that Sabbath: Jesus meets a man who was sick and needed to be healed. Stopping along the road and turning to the Pharisees who were with him, Jesus asked them: "Are you going to tell me that this man shouldn't be healed just because it's the Sabbath?" When nobody said anything, Jesus went ahead and healed the man.

Then they all went on to the dinner party.

You can understand a little better now why things were tense around the table. And why we were right to suspect that when Jesus spoke up at dinner, he wasn't just handing out advice for how to be a good host. The Pharisees knew immediately that Jesus was being fiercely critical of the social order that kept them comfortable and powerful...and kept a lot of other people suffering.

Their society was a society ordered by a social construct that did not in any way resemble the kingdom of God that Jesus kept preaching and teaching about. It was a system of honor and shame, where an invisible tally was always being kept. It was about who you were and how you looked and what kind of power you wielded and who you knew. And everybody was busy trying to climb that social ladder, to accumulate as much as possible on that tally sheet; it didn't much matter at all who you had to climb over to get there.

Jesus looked around the room and thought: this is not the kingdom of God. This is not at ALL God's hope for the whole world, in which we live together in peace, with justice, showing what could happen in human community when we make it a point to love God and love our neighbors.

So maybe it was exasperation. Or maybe Jesus didn't much care anymore to be polite. When he launched into his advice on hospitality, he really had two things to say.

First, we live in a world with systems that are broken and unjust. Every day, in fact, you and I wake up in a city with skyrocketing housing prices and unacceptable public schools and a minimum wage that nobody can live on. In our country, many children don't have enough to eat; some cities don't have safe drinking water; and healthcare is unavailable for many. Broken. Most days we feel there's not much we can do except play along, do what we can to make sure we're as secure as we can be in this difficult situation.

But Jesus would say no, no, no, as he did at dinner that night. There actually IS something you can do every day as you navigate your way in and out of situations where sexism and injustice and racism and a sick meritocracy are undeniably influencing our world. You can behave, not as the broken system expects and requires, but as if the kingdom of God were actually the order of the day.

Jesus told the people stepping over each other to get the best place at the table to instead go all the way to the end of the table and take the lowest place. Make room for others. Live with humility. In every single interaction we have we can choose whether we are demonstrating for others what the kingdom of God looks like.

And the second thing Jesus wanted to say he said directly to the Pharisees, the dinner hosts: those of you with power and influence, you have to change these broken systems. When you throw a dinner party, don't just invite your friends, people who can give the favor back. Invite people who wouldn't have the opportunity otherwise. Change the way the system works.

Jesus lived in a society where social institutions were “characterized by exploitation, political exclusion, and unequal access to resources, creating a system of winners and losers in which people became trapped, and structural violence resulted: power inequity, poverty, and the denial of basic human rights. Basic human needs went unmet, and groups suffered from inadequate access to resources and exclusion from institutional patterns of decision-making.”^[2] Sound familiar? It is familiar, because we live in a society like that, too.

Jesus wanted the unjust system changed then. And through his words in Luke's gospel today, he's offering the same challenge to us. Change the systems that break the backs of the poor and perpetuate generations of injustice. When you have power, it is your holy calling to dismantle systems that oppress people and to rebuild societal structures that make room for everybody.

When they set out to go to dinner tonight, the Pharisees were watching Jesus. But by the end of the night he had turned the spotlight on them. Are you going to behave like the kingdom of God is the real order of the day? Are you going to use your power and influence to change the systems that are hurting people?

We should be very careful if we read this passage from Luke's gospel and assume that Jesus is giving us a lesson about hospitality, because Jesus would have these same questions for us. Are we willing to push back against unjust systems and live as if the kingdom of God is coming to be all around us? Will all of us with power dismantle unjust systems? If we say that we are followers of Jesus Christ, we'd better get busy.

Because people are watching.

Amen.

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^[1] <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1553>

^[2] <http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/social-structural-changes>