

*Subversive Questions*  
A Pentecost 7 Sermon  
Luke 10:25-37  
Sunday, July 15, 2007  
by Dr. Frank Trotter

In this morning's edition of the *Los Angeles Times*, an article poses the question: "Who gets the dog when a couple divorces?" It seems that legislators in Wisconsin have "introduced a bill that outlines how divorcing couples and the courts should handle custody battles over pets."<sup>1</sup> The bill also addresses such issues as visitation rights, the right to move pets out of state, etc.

Talk about subversive questions! Do you mean to tell us that the time tested practice where divorcing couples argue sometimes to their last breath might be replaced by a law that might set standards for the peaceful, or least civil, resolution of pet custody?

There are, of course, much more substantial subversive questions being posed this weekend. Like, "Is David Beckham, the world famous English football star (or "soccer" for those of you who aren't quite up on sports terminology) who just received a reception worthy visiting royalty worth all of the money that the Los Angeles Galaxy have agreed to pay him?" That's absolutely subversive if you love soccer, or extraordinary star power, or sports in general in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area!

And here's a question that disturbs the core of many children as well as adults in our society. "Does Harry Potter live or die in the seventh and final book in the series by British author, J. K. Rowling – *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*? And a related question is, "No matter if he lives or dies, does he defeat Lord Voldemort, the very incarnation of evil?" Why you can go to the official J. K. Rowling website<sup>2</sup> to hear creepy music with dogs barking in the distance as these questions are cunningly proposed.

Subversive questions, by their very nature, seek to challenge our safest assumptions and core values. Everything is fair game to the asker of such questions. Nothing is sacred.

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<sup>1</sup> P. J. Huffstutter, "Who gets custody of Fido? Wisconsin chews over bill," *Los Angeles Times*, Sunday, July 15, 2007, A13.

<sup>2</sup> J. K. Rowling Official Site, <http://www.jkrowling.com/en/>.

But there's a great difference between those who ask subversive questions to intentionally rile us up with no other purpose than the heightened degree of agitation and those who ask such questions in the hope that our understanding of and practice of a particular belief system might be broadened and deepened.

Seth Benedict Brown, an anthropologist on the faculty of Stanford University, wrote in his Ph.D. thesis that even a joke or anecdote can be subversive. Referring to the black, and often bleak, humor in eastern European by the Stanford anthropologist Seth Benedict Graham: *A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet Anekdot* (anekdot is the Russian word for a political joke). Graham's earnest academic language suggests the standard theory of the joke as a tool of subversion: "An important reason for the anekdot's pre-eminence was its capacity to outflank, mimic, debunk, deconstruct, and otherwise critically engage with other genres and texts of all stripes and at all presumed points on the spectrum from resistance to complicity."<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, our Lord Jesus Christ often used the technique of asking pointed questions as a means of furthering a conversation. Sometimes he asked the questions without any introduction and sometimes he couched them at the end of a parable as he does today in the lesson we have heard from the Gospel of Luke.

When a lawyer comes to Jesus with the clear intention of entrapping him, he asks a question that is subversive in its own right, "Who is my neighbor?"

Biblical scholar Alan Culpepper notes, "Like most societies, first-century Judaism was ordered by boundaries with specific rules regarding how Jews should treat Gentiles or Samaritans, how priests should relate to Israelites, how men should treat women, and so on. Because the boundaries allowed for certain groups to establish their positions, power, and privilege, maintaining the boundaries was vital to social order. It was a religious duty."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Seth Benedict Brown, [http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article\\_details.php?id=7412](http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article_details.php?id=7412). Dr. Brown is Professor of Anthropology at Stanford University.

<sup>4</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 229.

In response to the question, Jesus tells a story that takes place in one of the most dangerous sections of Israel. The road to Jericho coming out of Jerusalem descends steeply over a distance of seventeen miles often leading a traveler through passes where the mountains create bottle necks ideally suited for bandits who made their living by robbing the travelers.

You know the story of what happens when a particular traveler is beset by such bandits. He is stripped, beaten, and left for dead. Fortunately, a fellow traveler – a priest, in fact – comes upon this victim of violence. The story makes sure that we understand that the priest sees the victim; but upon seeing him, he chooses to avoid him by crossing to the other side of the road. A second traveler comes along, a Levite who might also be expected to offer aid, but he, too, chooses the path of non-intervention.

In classic story telling, there are often three options or incidences. And that's the case here, too. A third character comes along and he breaks "the pattern created by the first two"<sup>5</sup> travelers.

Dr. Culpepper suggests that Jesus' audience would have expected the third traveler to be an Israelite. In no way could they have imagined that Jesus would tell a story where a Samaritan comes along to offer aid. For in choosing a Samaritan as the "hero," Jesus challenges "the long-standing enmity between Jews and Samaritans. The latter were regarded as unclean people... and by depicting a Samaritan as the hero of the story, therefore, Jesus [demolishes] all boundary expectations. Social position – race, religion, or region – count for nothing."<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, Dr. Culpepper says that "the detailed account of the Samaritan's care for the beaten man stands in sharp contrast to the sparsity of detail in the first part of the story."<sup>7</sup> Culpepper asks us to count the verbs in the thirty-fourth verse. The Samaritan "'*went* to him and *bandaged* his wounds, having *poured* oil and wine on them. Then he *put* him on his own animal, *brought* him to an inn, and *took care* of him' (italics added)."<sup>8</sup> And, before leaving, the Samaritan leaves money for his future care.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Then Jesus asks the subversive question, which by its nature leaves no option as to what the correct answer is: “Which of these three was a neighbor?” The lawyer cannot even say the word, “Samaritan,” and instead gives a non-specific answer: “Well, I suppose it was the one who gave mercy.”

Are there limits to God’s mercy? Do the expectations of the kingdom of God allow us to draw arbitrary boundaries of those whom we include and those whom we will not? Of course, we know that we create restricting boundaries just as the lawyer does. Why else would society have created the sarcastic saying, “Why I wouldn’t cross the road to help that guy”?

William Willimon, the bishop of the Northern Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church, says, “A plumb line is being held up against us... We gather in church to be closer to God. But how do we like proximity to a God who loves enough not to pass by but lingers long enough among us to judge us, to hold a higher standard of judgment against us than that by which we measure ourselves? To a God who is not only loving but righteous, and rarely leaves us unscathed? God is no limp projection of ourselves and our felt needs. God wields a sword against our self-righteous presumption, and against our positive self-image slams a disgusting Samaritan who, while not having our theological commitments, embodies those commitments better than we.”<sup>9</sup>

Richard Rohr, in a foreword to a book entitled, *The Questions of Jesus* by John Dear, notes that “Jesus asks questions, good questions, unnerving questions, re-aligning questions, transforming questions. He leads us into luminal, and therefore transformative space, much more than taking us into any moral high ground of immediate certitude or ego superiority. He subverts up front the cultural or theological assumptions that we are eventually going to have to face anyway. He leaves us betwixt and between, where God and grace can get at us, and where we are not at all in control.”<sup>10</sup>

And the questions that Jesus asks of us in terms of mercy go wider than just the church. How does the question of mercy play out in the context of the neighborhoods of Los Angeles where death and violence are frequent

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<sup>9</sup> William Willimon, “Blogging Toward Sunday,” at Theolog: The Blog of the Christian Century, 07/09/2007, <http://www.theolog.org/blog/2007/07/blogging-towa-1.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Rohr, Foreword to *The Questions of Jesus* by John Dear, <http://www.johndear.org/articles/theQuestionofJesus.htm>.

visitors? When we remain in safer communities, how are modeling the example of the Samaritan, the unexpected traveler?

How does the question of mercy play out in the context of the war in Iraq, a difficult dilemma that is tragic and fraught with difficulties? We so often see each other as enemies that it is very difficult to see the possibilities of reconciliation.

Contemporary poet Wendell Berry poses this question in one of his poems, “What is the difference between a patriot and a citizen who takes civic duties and responsibilities seriously?” He writes,

All that patriotism requires, and all that it can be,  
is eagerness to maintain intact and incorrupt  
the founding principles of the nation, and to preserve  
undiminished the land and the people. If national conduct  
forsakes these aims, it is one’s patriotic duty  
to say so and to oppose. What else have we to live for?<sup>11</sup>

Jesus asks so many provocative and unsettling questions. “Why have you come to me?” “What are you seeking?” “What does the scripture say in relation to your question?” And “Who do they say that I am?” (and by implication the more personal question, “Who do *you* say that I am?”).

They are all subversive questions, aren’t they? They do not leave us alone in safety and comfort but provoke us – so that our faith in Jesus Christ may be deepened and stretched.

William Shakespeare, in the tragedy *The Merchant of Venice*, has the character Portia offer an eloquent plea to Shylock in the midst of his moral dilemma:

The quality of mercy is not strain’d,  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath: it is twice bless’d;  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:  
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes  
The throned monarch better than his crown;  
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,

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<sup>11</sup> Wendell Berry, “VIII” from *Given: New Poems* (Emeryville, California: Shoemaker Hoard / Avalon Publishing Group, 2005), 130.

The attribute to awe and majesty,  
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;  
But mercy is above this sceptred sway,  
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,  
It is an attribute to God himself,  
And earthly power doth then show likest God's  
When mercy seasons justice.<sup>12</sup>

Hildegard of Bingen, the tenth century German visionary and saint, wrote,  
Holy Spirit,  
giving life to all life,  
moving in all creatures,  
root of all things,  
washing them clean,  
wiping out their mistakes,  
healing their wounds,  
you are our true life,  
luminous, wonderful,  
awakening the heart  
from its ancient sleep.<sup>13</sup>

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/297200.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, "Holy Spirit," quoted in *{Risking Everything}: 110 Poems of Love and Revelation*, edited by Roger Housden (New York: Harmony Books, 2003), 15.