

Our lawyer today in Luke is not the kind of lawyer you might find if you go downtown to the Department of Justice. He is an expert in Jewish law, and a really important fellow in Jewish life. This lawyer is a religious authority much like the Jewish priest and Levite we meet in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Knowing this, we can see some subtleties in our reading from Luke today. The expert in Jewish law is asking Jesus a question about the law, as well as about eternal life. The lawyer is not doing this because he doesn't know the answer. Maybe he feels threatened because Jesus is teaching without the proper educational background and license.

Jesus responds like a chess master. He turns the tables and asks the lawyer a basic legal question that the lawyer is forced to answer as if he were a youngster, and then Jesus the chess master puts the lawyer in check by saying, basically, "now go and behave that way."

You know how we humans get when we're publicly shamed. It's no surprise that the expert in Jewish law tried to get a little of his own back by asking who his neighbor was, exactly. In this sense, the lawyer acts like lawyers we know today. There were sometimes loopholes in Jewish law. Maybe this lawyer thought there would be a loophole that he could use to make himself look good.

Oh, but Jesus was ready for him. Jesus put him in checkmate with the parable of the Good Samaritan. You see, the bad guys in the parable represent the religious elite of Israel. They have the money and education and authority to lead Israel in the way of God. The beaten man represents all Jews. The Samaritan is part of the Jewish faith, but is a social and religious outsider.

Let's imagine the scene in the parable. The priest and the Levite are walking down the road. They have well-groomed beards. There's something about them that shows they are a religious authority. They're walking down the road, see a half-dead Jew, CROSS THE ROAD TO AVOID HIM, and keep on going.

The priest and Levite probably did this because they were concerned with ritual impurity. Those hearing Jesus tell this story would have understood that. You see, touching a dead person, or even someone's blood, would make you ritually impure and you'd have to purify yourself and isolate yourself for a period of time before you could return to public life, especially religious life.

This is Jewish law. This law was given to the Jews by God. But God also says many times that he prefers mercy to sacrifice, prefers mercy to a bunch of religious rules that leave out mercy.

Jesus is saying in this parable that the religious elite need to figure out a way to have mercy on the Jewish people instead of increase their suffering. Jesus seems to be saying that if religious rules are going to get you in trouble, go ahead and get in trouble. But for the love of all that's holy, show mercy. No matter what. And, Jesus seems to be saying, if you can't manage that, someone else will. We see later in scripture that someone else does, in the form of the early Christian Church.

In the Church today we don't have a bunch of rules about ritual impurity, and I'm thankful. There is nothing stopping me or our priests or even the bishops from caring for someone who really needs it, getting our hands a little dirty, and then getting up here and preaching or celebrating.

But, in the Church today, there are some similarities to the parable of the Good Samaritan. We have our own religious authorities and we have our own religious rules. We have priests and bishops and canon law and all that goes into the structure of our beautiful, beloved Worldwide Anglican Communion.

And while there's no rule stopping any Christian from pulling the poor and broken from the proverbial ditch and helping them to heal, I do think sometimes there's another body that's poor and beat up and in need of healing. One that's too commonly walked past, too commonly given up for dead. And that's the small, struggling church. Those small churches who've given everything they have and tried as hard as they can, but still can't quite grow the way they need to. Those small churches that must close their doors and disperse.

It's no one's fault. Because of historical and cultural and economic precedents, tens of thousands of mainline churches in North America are destined to be shut down in the next ten to twenty years. We're all trying to solve this problem as fast as we can, but for many small churches it may be inevitable. Our hands are tied. There are rules. If a church can't pay their costs, they will have to shut down. Are there loopholes? Some say no. I say yes.

Part of the problem is that small churches are caught in a growth economy problem, and it's really hard to get out of that. A growth economy is the world's economy, not the Kingdom of God's economy. And that's good news.

You see, we have everything we need to solve this problem. We have the Gospel, we have the Holy Spirit, and we know all about the economy of the Kingdom where the poorest is actually the richest, the smallest is the most powerful, and what looks like failure to the rest of the world is a glorious victory to God.

We can all be the Good Samaritan, choosing to break a few rules and risk big trouble within a structure of religious authority. Just look at the risks bishops took in the past by ordaining people of color and women. Just look at the Holy Spirit at work in recent years giving us bishops who are from all walks of life. And today we see ordinary people creating extraordinary solutions that include free and flexible seminary education, priests who serve small churches for free, and truly innovative congregational development that removes high costs for small churches while keeping those churches within their denominations.

Our religious authorities are looking for loopholes to help us get out of these problems, and so are committed lay people, but this takes time and there are sometimes pockets of resistance. Still, the movement of the Holy Spirit in small churches can be seen in Europe and to a certain extent here at home where we're seeing ordinary, poor, small groups of people who follow Jesus choosing mercy over a bunch of inherited problems. Choosing the "yes" of the Gospel in the face of the "no" of the world's economy.

Most of you came from a church that closed. Most of you came from a place of "no," and you chose "yes." Keep choosing the "yes" that follows Jesus, even if you receive a "no" that's difficult to hear. Keep choosing the "yes" that loves your neighbor, even if you don't have

a dime. Keep choosing the “yes” to mercy. That’s how the parable ends. Jesus tells us all to go and behave with mercy, no matter what.

This is mercy: serving and worshiping and celebrating communion together without fear or worry.

This is mercy: to gather and worship as the people of God no matter how many of us there are or how much money we don’t have.

This is mercy: to find a way to be the church without burdens we cannot bear.

This is mercy: joy and abundance and renewed strength because of smallness and poverty, not in spite of it.

Now, go, and act with mercy. Go, and behave as if this were the key to eternal life.