

Jesus' Saving Question: "*Who Are My Brothers and Sisters?*"

On of my favorite movies of all time was the 1961 film, "One, Two Three." It's one of my favorites for a number of reasons, but for one line in particular.

The film starred James Cagney as the Director of the Berlin Coca-Cola bottling plant, who is asked to look after the visiting daughter of the president of all of Coca-Cola. The movie got its title from the Cagney character's custom of barking out orders to his underlings as he walked from one busy item on his agenda to another. The young daughter, played by Pamela Tiffin, manages to find her way over to East Berlin, where she falls in love with and becomes engaged to an East German boy, played by Horst Buchholz, who has been brought up on, and totally buys into, Communist ideology. Cagney is convinced that his boss, who is coming to Berlin to celebrate his daughter's engagement, will have a fit (and then fire him) once he discovers the boy's background, so the plot commences on how to get this young man out of East Berlin and get him "Americanized" as soon as possible.

To get him to West Berlin, Cagney enlists two petty East German officials, who proceed either to bribe, threaten, or blackmail just about everyone they contact. Until this idealistic young man in utter frustration at watching his ideals so easily and breezily bartered away, cries out, "*Is everyone in the world corrupt?*" To which one of the East German officials replies (my favorite line): "*I don't know everybody!*"

It is out of frustration often that ultimate questions are asked. When our world goes topsy-turvy, when values get questioned or challenged, when the comfortable routine is broken or disrupted, when even our faith is put to the test. In such times, we begin to think — no longer of the trivial, or peripheral, or even workaday concerns. Ultimate questions come to the surface, and frame our thought processes.

Questions like: "*What is life all about, anyway?*" "*Where is God in all of*

this?” “What good is faith if this kind of thing can happen?” “Why me?” “Why now?” And glib answers like *“I don’t know everybody,”* come too easily to our lips.

This evening our Lord’s Saving Question comes to us not in the context of struggle, but in the comfort of worship. It comes, not as we are grappling with problems that tend to isolate us, but when we are in the midst of experiencing the blessings of God’s grace. It comes, not when we want to hurl questions against the sky in impotent rage against the inequities of life, but in a moment when we are vulnerable to complacency because those very inequities, in fact, are blessing us. But despite the situation in which we this evening encounter this question, and because we may not in these circumstances recognize it as such, it is an ultimate question. It questions our values. It questions our routines. It questions our faith, asking that we look hard at the reality of God’s presence in our world.

The question is this: ***“Who are my brothers and sisters?”***

We might be tempted to equate this question with the question raised by the young lawyer who wanted to justify himself by asking Jesus, ***“Who is my neighbor?”*** [Luke 10:29] In reply to that question, you may recall, Jesus presents what we now call The Parable of the Good Samaritan. Unfortunately, the lesson most people learn from that question and that parable is quite simplistic. Most are inclined to say something like: *“We learn here that we ought to see everyone as our neighbors — we are to act kindly, be helpful — and if we should stumble across a maimed and bloody half-dead body by the Jericho Road, we ought not be like the priest and Levite who ‘pass by on the other side.’”*

Our problem with the Good Samaritan parable is twofold: First, we are inclined to turn all the characters into caricatures (and thus render the story inapplicable to us). Then, we make it into a generalized morality play, where everybody is to love everybody. Well, you don’t know everybody. “Everybody” is an abstraction; there are no “flesh and blood” everybodies.

Jesus' Saving Question: "***Who Are My Brothers and Sisters?***" is not a question designed to elicit from us a Boy Scout theology: "*Do somebody a good deed today.*" It is a far deeper question. It zeroes in on the heart of our relationship with Christ

Out in the field, the ground saturated with the blood of his slain brother, Abel, stands Cain. In furious indignation at the lot of his life, he had flown into a murderous rage against his brother. Peeved at the inequity of God's refusal of his offering and acceptance of Abel's, he had plotted, then committed, his crime. The guilt of that anger oozed from every pore of his being, yet his self-centeredness was still very much at the center.

God confronts him: "***Where is your brother Abel?***" Not only does he lie — "***I do not know . . .***" when he does know; he responds with something more odious than the lie — a defense: "***. . . am I my brother's keeper?***" What makes that defense so repugnant is that we want to buy into it — "*Of course you're your brother's keeper!*"

NO! You are NOT your brother's keeper! Zoos have keepers! Museums have keepers! Jails have keepers! Cain! Cain! Cain! — You are your brother's brother.

You were responsible for him to care for him. You are the one called upon to rejoice in his rejoicing and to weep in his weeping. You are the brother, expected to love and support and embrace Abel, but all the while "***sin [was] lurking at the door; its desire [was] for you,***" and you let it take control. You allowed sin to well up inside until jealousy overcame love, spiteful greed supplanted brotherly support, rejection took the place of the loving embrace.

"***Who are my brothers and sisters?***" Those who feed my ego? Those who trip all over themselves because of my altruism? Who stroke my self-righteousness? Who allow my self-congratulatory self-importance to run unabated?

No! Jesus says, "***Here are my brothers and sisters and mother . . .***" The great unwashed who offend sensibilities by having the audacity to be

poor in an affluent society. The ones who refuse to fit the squeaky-clean image of television advertisers and VISA/MASTERCARD expectations. Those who dare to distort government statistics by remaining unemployed. Those who are hungry in a nation with resources enough to feed the globe. The ones who are inconsiderate enough to be old and infirm in a culture that chooses to glorify aerobic perfection. Those who cannot cope with the stress of life — life that is portrayed as free and open, wholesome and without cares.

Jesus does not make that claim about who are His brothers and sisters and mother in a vacuum, or just in theory. There are no caricatures here. He was ***“looking at those who sat around him.”*** Jesus’ brothers and sisters are real, flesh and blood, people.

Okay, so aren’t we at the same point we were at the end of the Good Samaritan story? Are we not saying that, while we cannot love “everybody,” particularized “somebodies” do need our help? That would be the case, if Jesus left it there — but He doesn’t.

“Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” So what does Jesus mean by that? That those who keep themselves morally, ritually, culturally pure are His brother and sister and mother? No — He is talking about those who identify with Him

Those who do ***“the will of God”*** are those who desire to reach out to the lost, the outcast, the rejected, the isolated; those who identify with them in their plight. Jesus’ brothers and sisters are those who have mercy. Not pity — which we have allowed to become a concept which allows us to sit back idly with the self-assuredness that all that was required was that we feel bad. Jesus’ brothers and sisters exercise mercy — an active, vital outreach of love and care.

There’s another really good line in that movie “One, Two, Three.” Arlene Francis plays the wife of the Coca-Cola bigwig. As she is getting off the plane, she is introduced to her new soon-to-be-son-in-law (Horst Buchholz’s character) who is still trying desperately to find someone who

is not going to slide into the morass of corruption that has spirited him out of his home in East Germany. He pleads with his new mother-in-law, *“Madame, I appeal to you, as a woman.”* Arlene’s character replies, *“As a matter of fact, you do!”*

Jesus’ brothers and sisters do not always appeal to us. They may make appeals to us; they may cry out to us or at us — in hope, or in pain, or in anger — but they seldom appeal to us. A reality that Norman Habel has captured well in this poem: **“FOR THOSE WHO FIND IT HARD TO LOVE”**

My Lord,
I'm sure that you must realize by
now
that you are asking me to do the
impossible.
At least, it's impossible for me.
I can't love other people all the
time.
I have trouble loving myself
sometimes.
Other people are different
or disgusting
or dull
or dirty.
And I hate dirty people.
They make me sick.
There are some people I don't
even want to love,
or like,
or help,
or understand,
or go through the agony of

forgiving.
They do things to annoy me.
Or they get on my nerves
and make me mad.
Others are really enemies.
Do you understand, God, my
enemies?
How can I love people the way
that you demand,
forgetting about my own needs,
to rescue them?
It's impossible.
And yet you say that people who
do not love
do not know God.
Don't I know you, God?
I want to know you.
If you can love me all the way,
if you can surrender yourself into
my hand
if you can give yourself to die
for me,

yes, if you can love like that,
you must be God, I think.
But I can't seem to love,
and I can't see you.

I strive to pose a front,
a masquerade of love
and concern for others,
for the ugly and the idiot.
But I know the sham I have
created
and so do you .
You show me all that Christ has
done.
You say, "Look, there is love."
I see and say, "Amen."
But after that I fall.
I need another step,
I need a lift,
I need a power ,
I need something more
than this image of perfect
suffering,
of Christ the love of God,
hanging on my wall.

I need you, God, within me.
I need some love genes driving
me,
driving me to love,
to forgive,
from those I cannot love.

Please, God, may others who
have loved

show me that power now to love
the loveless
and the dying,
to forgive the unforgivable
and the lying,
before it is too late.

Bind me to Christ
and make me over again. If you
can love me all the way,
if you can surrender yourself into
my hand
if you can give yourself to die
for me,
yes, if you can love like that,
you must be God, , think.
But I can't seem to love,
and I can't see you.
, strive to pose a front,
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Taken from *Are You Joking Jeremiah?* by Norman C. Habel, published by Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis

Who are my brothers and sisters? “*I don’t now everybody!*” But there are many I do know, and see, and read about, and hear reported. I am tied to them, and hard as it may be love them, they are my brothers and sisters, and I am called to take some responsibility for them. Many of them do not appeal to me in any way — but they are my brothers and sisters just the same.

They are my brothers and sisters, because they are — as am I — the brothers and sisters and mother of Jesus.

Amen.