



The Gospel of Luke

Luke 9:1-11:54: Jesus Begins to Form a Community

Much of the material in Luke chapter 9 draws extensively on Mark's Gospel. In Luke 9:1-6 as in Mark 6:6-13 Jesus sends the twelve forth to do much of what he has done— to teach and to heal. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, like Jesus who is both prophet and fulfillment of prophecy, they are entrusted with a ministry both of word and deed. Only Luke tells us explicitly that when Jesus commissions these disciples he sends them. The Greek verb he uses is *apostello*. Only in Luke's gospel do the twelve explicitly become the "apostles"—and in Acts even more than in this gospel we watch them fulfill the commission Jesus gives them.

The confession of Jesus as Messiah/Christ and the story of the Transfiguration come at the very center of Mark's Gospel. In Luke they come at the end of Jesus' Galilean ministry and before his long and convoluted road to Jerusalem. Geography and theology are closely linked in both Luke and Acts, so this junction in Jesus' itinerary (as he begins to move through greater opposition toward death and resurrection) is also a turning place in the story.

In the story of the confession of Messiahship (Luke 9:18-22) Luke presents Peter as the representative confessor, as do Mark and Matthew. However, Luke's version lacks Jesus' strong commendation of Peter, that we find in Matthew: "You are the rock." Luke also omits Peter's stupefaction at Jesus' prediction of his own suffering and death and Jesus' quick rebuke of Peter— "You Satan"—that we find in both the other synoptic gospels.

One suspects that Luke wants to emphasize that the confession of Jesus' messiahship is an apostolic confession, not belonging to Peter alone, and that Luke is more willing to display the inadequacy of apostolic understanding than its entire befuddlement. As in the other synoptic gospels, the issue is not just that Jesus will have to suffer, but that those who follow him will have to suffer as well. The community Jesus builds is a community of suffering.

In the Transfiguration story (9:28-36) Luke picks up on the mix between faithfulness and fragility in the community Jesus is forming. As in Matthew and Mark the disciples, represented by Peter, do not know quite what to make of the revelation of Jesus shining in glory next to Moses and Elijah. In Luke alone we learn that the disciples have been "heavy with sleep"—surely a foreshadowing of their sleepiness in Gethsemane (22:45). Even more or less awake they do not quite get it: this revelation is not about sacred places (building tents) but about a sacred calling. And Moses and Elijah are not Jesus' peers but his precursors and inferiors. As in

the baptismal scene it is God's own voice that makes the point clear: "This is my Son, my chosen, listen to him." (9:35)

Sharon Ringe wisely suggests that the "exodus" Moses, Elijah, and Jesus are talking about in v. 31 may not have been Jesus' exodus in death but the long trip he is about to embark on as he heads toward Zion—his own version of Moses' exodus and Elijah's prophetic wandering. In any case, with Luke 9:51 that journey begins.

One can understand the long journey that follows—from 9:51-19:28 – as an accountant might, toting up the contributions from various sources. On the whole these chapters are the place where Luke departs from the material he received from Mark and adds material from the source he shares with Matthew and from his own anecdotal treasury. A more literary way of understanding it is to say that now as the drama intensifies, Jesus uses this journey to tell his disciples the last things—what they need to know in the light of his own impending passion.

In the first part of chapter ten, Jesus instructs the disciples once again on what they are supposed to do to proclaim and enact the gospel among the neighbors.

The Good Samaritan

In 10:25-37 he suggests that the neighborhood is bigger than they think. The significance of this parable is far better discussed among friends than argued by a scholar.

Let us just suggest a few features of the story that might enter into the interpretation.

Notice that we have a story within a story within a story. The inner story is the story we call the story of the Good Samaritan. The slightly larger story is the story of the lawyer's dialogue with Jesus. The largest story is the story of the whole Gospel—which illumines the parable and is itself illumined. (Finally, it is Jesus who finds himself wounded and among thieves).

Ponder whether the lawyer is trying to obey the law or to evade it. He is testing Jesus—but is this in order to put Jesus down or in order to learn from him?

Notice that Jesus never answers the lawyer's main question. To the Samaritan's question "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus responds with a counter question: "Which one acted like a neighbor?"

Remember what you learned in Sunday School, that the Samaritan is the classic example of the "Other." Whoever seems most "Other" to your neighborhood, that's the Samaritan among you.

And notice that the power of the story does not only lie with the Samaritan who chooses to be a neighbor, but with the Jewish man who must be shocked by the discovery that this Samaritan is the only neighborly one in the neighborhood.

And notice what we all know, that apathy takes little time or energy. Just pass by. Compassion is complicated. It takes time, money, arrangements; it is always inconvenient.

Also notice that Luke and or Jesus so often display a kind of "on the other hand" Gospel. On the one hand the Good Samaritan is praised for doing so much and on the other hand Mary—to the

chagrin of her beleaguered sister Martha—is commended for doing so little (Luke 10:38-42). Perhaps the Gospel is not so much about rules as it is about opportunities for faithfulness—different opportunities, different responses.

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