

“The Church of the Homeless Jesus as a Home for the Holidays”  
Advent 4C (December 23, 2018)  
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>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen<<

On Friday, Jerry Coyne, Emeritus Professor of Ecology and Evolution at the University of Chicago, published a piece titled, “Yes, There is a War between Science and Religion.”<sup>1</sup> Science, he writes, searches for “truth about the universe” through observation, “doing experiments,” and “replicating ... [the] results.” Religion, on the other hand, he says, searches for truth “via dogma, scripture, and authority.” “The conflict between [them],” he says, “rests on the [conflicting] methods they use to decide what is truth ... .” I winced when I read Coyne’s characterization of religion with the words “dogma” and “authority.” I wonder if he’s ever been to a UCC church!

Friday’s article was not the first time Coyne made this argument. He published a book on the conflict between science and religion back in 2015, which won mixed reviews in the *Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, and others. Mixed reviews, because it seems that whenever scientists venture of course into the churning waters of the religious world, in order to criticize religion, they tend to take aim at the easy conservative religious targets: Coyne’s easy target is the dismissal of climate change by some more conservative people of faith, who ignore the warnings of scientists - an example of people of *faith* venturing off course into the world of science. But Coyne’s writings have also received mixed reviews because he, like other scientists before him (Richard Dawkins, for example), have struggled to answer the question of why human beings are moral. A quick word search on Dawkins’ book *The Magic of Reality*, which is a book about truth, yields no results when looking for the words “morals” or “ethics.”<sup>2</sup> It’s a very basic question: Where does our moral sense come from? Our sense of right and wrong. Or, as Richard Dawkins asks in his book *The God Delusion*, “where does the Good Samaritan in us come from?” Jerry Coyne, Richard Dawkins and many others have argued that our altruism - the Good Samaritan in us - has evolutionary origins.<sup>3</sup> We act as Good Samaritans, says Dawkins, because it’s in our interest to do so: it’s in our interest to care for our family and kin; and we do good deeds, he says, because we might get paid back for it; and we give of ourselves, he says, because we can gain a reputation of being generous. Three<sup>4</sup> evolutionary reasons for being altruistic - for being Good Samaritans to people: it helps our family; we might get paid back; and doing good is a form of self-promotion. Dawkins calls it “reciprocal altruism,” or, as he says, “You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours.”

I personally enjoy reading about the evolutionary origins of altruism just as I welcome the efforts of neuroscientists who study our brains as we pray to find out what’s going on inside our heads when we breathe and release our concerns. I certainly don’t want to venture too far afield in this sermon into the world of evolutionary biology. But what strikes me as odd is that none of the three reasons, the three evolutionary reasons for being Good Samaritans - for

<sup>1</sup> <https://theconversation.com/yes-there-is-a-war-between-science-and-religion-108002>

<sup>2</sup> See:

[https://www.amazon.com/Magic-Reality-Know-Whats-Really/dp/1451675046/ref=sr\\_1\\_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1545436303&sr=8-3&keywords=richard+dawkins+books](https://www.amazon.com/Magic-Reality-Know-Whats-Really/dp/1451675046/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1545436303&sr=8-3&keywords=richard+dawkins+books)

<sup>3</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 219-220.

<sup>4</sup> There are actually four reasons, but the fourth is an amplification of the third.

family, for pay-back, or for reputation - seem to apply in the case of the Parable of the Good Samaritan as told by Jesus. The Good Samaritan in that story doesn't help the man-left-for-dead because he's kin; he doesn't help the hurting man with any expectation of pay-back; and he doesn't help him, it seems, to receive accolades. The Good Samaritan helps the man because the man needed help. That's it. He scratches the wounded man's back, and expects nothing in return.

In that most famous of Jesus' parables that I read a moment ago, Jesus is asked by an expert in Jewish law, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus, good rabbi that he was, doesn't answer the man's question directly, but instead asks *him* two questions, "What is written in the law?," asks Jesus, "What do *you* read there?" Jesus seems genuinely interested in the man's answer - genuinely interested in what *he* thinks. The lawyer answered by quoting the two love commands from the Old Testament: "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength," and "love your neighbor as yourself." "You're right," said Jesus. "Go and do them." But the lawyer pressed further, not to trap Jesus as so many other religious experts tried to do, but pressed further because he seemed genuinely interested in *Jesus'* interpretation. So he asked, "Who is my neighbor?" "Who should I love as I love myself?"

This question - the who-is-my-neighbor question - is a question that writer Jonathan Merritt recently asked New Yorkers in Times Square. Merritt went out into midtown toting a microphone and camera with a hunch that when hearing the word "neighbor" the average New Yorker would assume someone closeby or nextdoor, because, says Merritt, in our modern context, people tend to think of a "neighbor" in terms of proximity - someone living nearby, who is friendly and will lend a hand when you need it.<sup>5</sup> Out in Times Square, one woman he interviewed said that Merritt was her "neighbor" because he was close by and having a nice conversation with her. Another woman said a neighbor is a "friend." Another said a neighbor is someone who is "next to you," who will "help you" when you need it. Another woman said a neighbor is someone who "knows you well," "someone friendly." A man from the Bronx said neighbors are "great friends." One older woman answered the question by saying, "it depends" on whether the person living nearby is nice. Only nice people are "neighbor[s]," she said. And one guy stood out for his humor: "the ideal neighbor to me," he said, "lives somewhere over the hill ... where I can't see them."

With the exception of that last comment, the answers of pretty much everyone else interviewed seem to me to be in line with the evolutionary roots of altruism, thinking of a neighbor in terms of reciprocal altruism: a neighbor is someone you know, who lives nearby, who helps out and is friendly, whose back you scratch and who will scratch your back in turn, and both of you will gain a reputation of being "good" or "nice neighbors."

But when Jesus tells his story about neighbors and Good Samaritans, he emphasizes anonymity and otherness. No one in the story is given a name; they're all given categories: a priest, a Levite, a Samaritan, a wounded man. And the irony of the story is that those closest to the wounded man from Israel in terms of kin relations - the priest and the Levite - were the ones who passed him by, while the Samaritan - the anonymous other - is the one who stops to help. The significance of this is sometimes lost on us today. Samaritans and Jews had a long and complicated history of feuding - feuding over borders and boundaries; feuding over

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<sup>5</sup> <http://jonathanmerritt.com/what-do-americans-think-about-the-word-neighbor/>

ethnic origins; feuding over theology - each accusing the other of heresy for worshipping differently and reading different sacred texts. Jesus is asked a question about what loving a neighbor looks like in practice, and he points to the person from a different religion and a different background, who stopped to help someone in need, and basically says, “be like him.” I wonder if the first listeners of this story gasped when Jesus said the word “Samaritan.” Luke, the gospel writer, brilliantly conveys the surprise appearance of this word in the story. When Luke introduces the priest and the Levite in the story, he adds Greek words. The priest is introduced in the story with “Now by chance a priest . . . .” And the Levite is introduced in the story with “So likewise a Levite . . . .” But when Luke introduces the Samaritan, he doesn’t add extra introductory words. Greek word order is fluid; so, words at the beginning of sentences are often put there by writers for emphasis. And after Luke introduces the priest and the Levite with extra words, the first word introducing the next person is “Samaritan.” “Now by chance a priest saw the man and passed him by.” “So likewise a Levite saw the man and passed him by.” “Samaritan!” The word jumps off the page in all its unexpected glory. “Samaritan stopped to help the man.” The unlikeliest of the three - the one from a different religion and from a different ethnic background - stopped, rearranged his schedule, bandaged the man’s wounds, took him to safe place, paid his medical bills - all of it - with no expectation that his back would be scratched in return.

I love how modern artists depict this story. One painting is of a Native American helping a wounded cowboy. Another is of a palestinian helping a wounded Israeli soldier. Another is of a gay, undocumented migrant helping a wounded man in a shirt and tie. Another is of an African-American teen in a hoodie sweatshirt helping a wounded white man in a suit. All attempt to convey the surprising otherness of the Good Samaritan in that ancient story Jesus once told.

I’ve often wondered why Jesus could be so accepting of difference - why he could so freely ignore the categories we use to label people, and why he could so freely traverse the boundaries we draw, the borders we create, the walls we try to build to divide us. Over the past few weeks, as I’ve gone back and forth between the New Testament gospels and the news on our southern border it occurred to me that Jesus is presented in the gospels as border-less. Actually, he’s presented as homeless. In today’s reading from Matthew’s gospel, Jesus is approached by a scribe who says, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus replies, as he sometimes does in the gospels, with a comment that makes you scratch your head: “Foxes have holes,” he says, “and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” Foxes have homes. Birds have homes. But the Son of Man - a phrase Jesus often uses to refer to himself - but *I* have no home. Perusing the New Testament gospels, we find that once Jesus leaves his childhood home of Nazareth and begins his adult ministry, he’s presented as a wanderer, moving freely from Jerusalem into gentile territory, into Samaritan territory, coastlands to hills to countrysides to cities - boundary-less, border-less. In her book *Jesus was a Migrant* - our community read this Advent season - Deirdre Cornell puts it bluntly, “Jesus [wa]s homeless.”<sup>6</sup> “The Son of Man,” admits Jesus, “has nowhere to lay his head.” Perhaps his adult life is intended to mirror his refugee life as a baby when his parents fled in the night to Egypt.

Jesus the homeless, boundary-less, border-less adult criss-crossed and traversed all sorts of boundaries. Not just when he said “Samaritan” in that great parable he once told. But also

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<sup>6</sup> Deirdre Cornell, *Jesus was a Migrant* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014), 26.

when he stretched out his hand and crossed the boundary of religious purity to touch a leper. And Jesus the homeless, boundary-less, border-less adult relaxed the boundary of religious purity when he let a desperate woman with an issue of blood touch him. And Jesus the adult without borders breached the boundary of decorum when he showed grace to a weeping prostitute who crashed his dinner party. And Jesus the homeless wanderer ignored the criticism of the crowd when he invited himself over to the home of Zacchaeus the tax collector in order to eat with a man whom everyone else shunned. And the boundary-less Jesus traversed the boundary of gender-difference when he sat beside a woman at a well, and had a conversation with her, treating her as a human being, an equal in a patriarchal time. That woman at the well in John's gospel was a Samaritan.

Maybe Jesus is presented as boundary-less and border-less in the gospels, because, as one New Testament writer put it, "Jesus is the image of the invisible God." And God is a God who ignores our boundaries and our categories, ignores our borders and our walls, and loves us and shows grace to us without any expectation of reciprocal altruism. God *is* love, says the New Testament. And Christ is the image of that God, says our Christian tradition.

In his book *Theory of the Border*, Thomas Nail, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Denver, argues that borders and walls and fences are erected not to bar entry, but to control *who* enters. They're like the front doors of our houses. Doors we open for some people, and close to keep out others. But what might it look like for us as a church, and as people of faith, to follow a Jesus who had no home or front door? Amen.