

# WHAT PORCUPINES CAN TELL US ABOUT LOVING OUR NEIGHBOUR WHO IS ALSO OUR ENEMY

*Posted on October 20, 2019 by Andrew Brown*



An [Old World Porcupine](#) (Photo: Andrew Butko)

## INTRODUCTION

After last week's address I had a very interesting and helpful conversation with C about what might any actual attempt to follow Jesus in showing love our neighbours look like, particularly those whom we feel to be our enemies? The conversation was had because, when all is said and done, loving one's neighbours who are also enemies is something which continues to feel like a task that can never properly be done — it remains an impossible ideal.

But before going on to our readings and my address which follows I need to note four things.

The first is that everything I say here overlaps significantly with loving any kind of neighbour but, today, I want only to focus on the hugely problematic matter of how to love (or we may say,

show mercy to) the neighbour who is (or is perceived to be) an enemy.

The second thing to be clear about is that I am using the word ‘enemy’ in its widest sense to include not only those against whom we might be fighting in some obvious violent, war-like way, but also those with whom we very, very, strongly disagree in our own contemporary national religious and political contexts.

The third thing to note is that showing love/mercy to one’s neighbours who are also enemies clearly isn’t going to be about showing, in the same kind of ways, precisely the same kind of love/mercy one shows to neighbours who clearly are not our enemies. The two are related, of course, but not the same.

And, lastly, since we are going to be considering the parable of the Good Samaritan in some detail, the fourth thing to note is that it isn’t concerned to suggest that having or distributing money is central as Margaret Thatcher mistakenly revealed she thought it was [at the very end of a famous 1980 TV interview with Brian Walden](#) when she said ‘No-one would remember the good Samaritan if he’d only had good intentions; he had money as well.’

Whilst it is undeniably true that the Good Samaritan used his money to help facilitate the showing of his love/mercy to his a neighbour who was also his enemy (and I’ll explain why they were enemies later on in the address proper) it’s vital to see that to focus on the money is to be sent off after a veritable red herring. It isn’t money that is central to the parable but rather **the way** the Samaritan **used his money** to reveal the actual something that is, in fact, central to Jesus’ teaching about how we might most appropriately (we might say best) show love/mercy to a neighbour who is also our enemy.

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## READINGS

### Luke 10:25-37

*Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.’ And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’*

*But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’ Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place*

*and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He 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. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'*

**Michael Oakeshott, from 'Talking Politics' (1975) in 'Rationalism in politics and other essays (Liberty Fund, 1991, pp. 460-461)**

*There was once, so [Schopenhauer](#) tells us, a colony of porcupines. They were wont to huddle together on a cold winter's day and, thus wrapped in communal warmth, escape being frozen. But, plagued with the pricks of each other's quills, they drew apart. And every time the desire for warmth brought them together again, the same calamity overtook them. Thus they remained, distracted between two misfortunes, able neither to tolerate nor to do without one another, until they discovered that when they stood at a certain distance from one another they could both delight in one another's individuality and enjoy one another's company. They did not attribute any metaphysical significance to this distance, nor did they imagine it to be an independent source of happiness, like finding a friend. They recognized it to be a relationship in terms not of substantive enjoyments but of contingent considerabilities that they must determine for themselves. Unknown to themselves, they had invented civil association.*

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## ADDRESS

### **What porcupines can tell us about loving our neighbour who is also our enemy**

The thing to see clearly in the parable is that when it comes to anything to do with what is meant by the word 'neighbour' and our expressions of, or lack of, love/mercy to them, finding the appropriate distance in our relationships is key, as is memorably displayed in the nineteenth-century German philosopher [Arthur Schopenhauer's \(1788-1860\)](#) parable of the porcupine that so attracted the twentieth-century English philosopher and political theorist [Michael Oakeshott \(1901-1990\)](#).



The road from Jerusalem to Jericho (After a Photograph)

Once you have realised this we can see that in the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus places before us a number of examples of inappropriate and appropriate modulation of distance between the injured Jewish man and the people who see him at the side of the road, each of whom — through their different kinds of distance — succeeds in either displaying appropriate love/mercy to their neighbour or showing its lack. Let's walk through the story closely to see what I mean.

The first modulation of distance shown is that which existed between the Jewish man and the robbers. Obviously, in order to mug him the robbers firstly had to come very close to the man. But the quality of their closeness reveals clearly how far away from the man they really are, at least in terms of showing love/mercy. Then, after having been so close to the man, the robbers put a relationship breaking farness between them and him by disappearing entirely from the scene leaving the man alone and seriously injured by the side of the road. In short we can see that the way distance is modulated between the robbers and the Jewish man is throughout **inappropriate**.

The second and third modulations of distance shown are those which existed between the priest and the Levite who pass by in quick succession. Now it's important to see that in religious, national, political and ethnic terms, the priest, the Levite and the injured man are in fact very close — they are, after all, all Jews, kinsmen if you like, people who, in any normal way, would be considered neighbours one to another, and neighbours who are not enemies. But something about their closeness together (a closeness to do with shared religious beliefs about ritual cleanliness and purity) clearly reveals how far away from the injured man they are, at least in terms of showing love/mercy. As we know this very closeness is what helps drive the priest and the Levite to cross to the other side of the road putting a relationship breaking farness between themselves and the injured man and they disappear entirely from the scene in order to keep themselves ritually pure and undefiled. In short we can see that the modulation of distance

between the priest, the Levite and the Jewish man are also all **inappropriate**.

The fourth modulation of distance is seen with the arrival of the travelling Samaritan who, when he sees the injured man ‘was moved with pity.’ Here it is absolutely vital to remember that the majority of the first Jewish hearers of Jesus’ parable mistrusted and even hated Samaritans — they were perceived to be an enemy. A major reason for this state of affairs was that in ca. 112/111 BCE the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim had been destroyed by [Yōḏānān Hurqanōs](#) (John Hyrcanus, 164 BCE-104 BCE), an action which is generally thought to have been the cause of the final split between Jews and Samaritans. Not surprisingly the majority of Samaritans reciprocated this distrust and hatred and, during Jesus’ childhood (c. 9 CE), these old tensions were revived because the Samaritans had desecrated the Jewish Temple at Passover by scattering human bones in the porticoes and throughout the building ([Josephus, Antiquities 18.29-30](#)). In short we need to see clearly that the Good Samaritan and the injured Jewish man were considered by most people of the time (including themselves) to be enemies. Notice, too, — and how striking this is — that Jesus the Jew chooses the alien and enemy Samaritan to be the ‘hero’ of his parable.

As we all know, the distance between the Good Samaritan and the injured Jewish man is significantly narrowed when the Good Samaritan, moved by pity, chooses to cross the road to tend directly to the injured man’s wounds by bandaging them and pouring soothing oil and wine on them. He then puts the man on his own animal, accompanies him to an inn, and takes care of him. Their closeness to each other at this point is being flagged up by Jesus as being **appropriate** in the way that the earlier examples of closeness were not.

Now, at this point in the story many of us are tempted to chase after the red herring of **closeness** seeing it as primary. But let’s now recall our cold porcupines.

As my earlier explanation will have revealed, Samaritans and Jews were spiky creatures — the encounter between them in first-century Israel/Palestine was always one in which, as neighbours who were also enemies, they were constantly experiencing either the cold of separation from each other or the painful pricks of each other’s quills in their close encounters in places such as the road which ran between Jerico and Jerusalem and through each others historic lands.

Given that the injured man was Jewish, the Good Samaritan would all too easily have been seen as being just the kind of enemy person to have perpetrated such a crime in the first place. Consequently, it is perfectly understandable that he would not have wanted to stick around for too long. Although it is likely that the Samaritan had his own pressing personal reasons to be quickly on his way it is not at all too far fetched to suggest that the Jewish innkeeper, his staff and the other Jewish guests at the inn may have quickly come to resent the moral and ethical spikes that the Samaritan’s expression of neighbourly love/mercy to an enemy was driving into their

own consciences — spikes which would naturally have hurt the pride of those who must have known that they should have showed love/mercy to one who was so obviously a neighbour to them.

So what does the Good Samaritan do? Well, he seems to have understood that to continue to show an **appropriate** love/mercy to his neighbour/enemy he must now quickly put some significant, but **appropriate** relationship maintaining fairness between them — unlike the earlier, **inappropriate** relationship breaking fairness that the robbers and the priest and the Levite put between themselves and the injured man. The Good Samaritan does this, as you know, by leaving the innkeeper with some money (about two days wages) which would have the additional benefit of helping to prime the pump of neighbourly love which had so clearly dried up in the injured man's neighbours who were not enemies. The Samaritan adds the possibility of there being a continued real and **appropriate** connection across the distance he was about to open up by saying 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend'. We do not, of course, know whether he did or did not return but his words must surely have been an encouragement to the innkeeper et. al to begin to continue to show their own appropriate mercy/love to their neighbour. There's actually more to say about this bit of the story but for now I'll leave it hanging.

Anyway, I hope you can see that it is precisely by creating a new **appropriate** fairness distance between him and the injured Jewish man that the Good Samaritan is able to continue show to him an **appropriate** love/mercy. In short we can see that throughout their encounter the modulation of distance between the Good Samaritan and the injured Jewish man was, unlike the other examples, always **appropriate**.

Let's now briefly return to the porcupines.

The muggers got inappropriately close to the Jewish man — their quills, deliberately and violently forced home, pricked the Jewish man almost unto death and then they got too far apart only making the situation worse, colder.

The priest and Levite went through a similar process; their initial closeness in religious/ethnic terms caused the spiky quill that was fear of ritual uncleanness to drive them away from the injured Jewish man which, once again only made the situation worse, colder.

In his actions, however, the Good Samaritan reveals himself to be a wise and good porcupine. He knew that he could best show his love/mercy to his neighbour (who was also his enemy) by engaging in a careful, constant modulation of distance, moving close to the injured neighbour who was an enemy at a certain point and moment, and moving away from him at another point and moment as local circumstances changed.

So, let me now return to my opening question: what does any actual attempt to follow Jesus in showing love our neighbours — particularly those whom we feel to be our enemies — look like?

It seems to me that it must look something like the porcupines in Schopenhauer's story. We love our neighbour (even those whom we'd call enemies) not by creating a wholly unrealistic, unsustainable and idealistic **closeness** together but by creating **appropriate** rather than **inappropriate** distances between us (sometimes close, sometimes far); we do it by always seeking to find and/or create various temporary **places** where together we can all regain some meaningful sense of **belonging** rather than **not belonging** together as neighbours; we do it by always seeking to discern when is the **right** rather than the **wrong moment** to do whatever thing it is that can actually be done by us in that moment.

In short loving one's neighbour who is, in some fashion, our enemy, can never be a straightforward simple rules-based exercise which looks the same in every situation. It's always something that must be improvised anew on the actual roadsides and in the inns of life in each actual moment of life as it unfolds.

For what it's worth — which I realise may be not much — in my opinion the key thing to remember in our present febrile national situation is, following Schopenhauer/Oakeshott, always to be wise and good porcupines constantly seeking to modulate appropriate distances from each other so as to be able, as best we can, 1) to continue to show real, actual love/mercy to each other, 2) to continue to delight in one another's individuality and enjoy one another's company, and 3) to continue to recognize our relationship in terms not of substantive enjoyments — i.e. all enjoying, loving, thinking exactly the same things in exactly the same way — but in terms of contingent considerabilities that we must always be determining for ourselves and which are the basis of any genuine and decent civil association.