Theology's Heartbeat

by Wes Avram

Among the ideas central to the thinking of Ivan Illich was his emphasis on the intimacy of the Christian message with its corruption. His invocation of the Latin formula *corruptio optimi pessima* holds the idea that the corruption of the best is the worst—giving a kind of apocalyptic weight to the history of Christianity. The idea radicalizes a dual affirmation, first that essential to the Christian story is a uniquely transformative affirmation whose implications are most congenial to human flourishing and, second, that that same affirmation holds within it a potential—realized in describable ways—for counterproductive enactment so destructive, and so self-deceiving, that it can be considered *least* congenial to human flourishing. Like flame and fire, if you will, Christianity becomes *both*—the best and the worst, inseparable. In short, the story of the coming of the One called the Christ unleashes a kind of instability that has chronically contradictory consequences, particularly apparent in the modern era when Christian language often masks its own perversion (becoming anti-Christ).[1] This instability is not simply an accident of poor application of the faith in some kind of 'user error.' It is endemic to Christian experience and the tension it represents is essential.

This instability should not only be a core topic for theology, it should also affect how theology is done. To think more about this, let us presume in a way consistent with Illich

1 Illich advocates a return to the language of "anti-Christ," with a remembered understanding of its traditional meaning, in *Rivers*.

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that on this side of Paradise all we can know of revelation's fire are traces of its flames. Finding those traces can be like finding evidence of how a fire spread in the wreckage of a burned-out house. Such investigation might be an apt description for how an Illich-inspired kind of theological reflection might proceed—free of any delusion of completeness or systematization. Such reflection includes a phenomenology, seeking words for an originating dynamic to faith that is pre-verbal, even pre-thetic. Theology in this vein becomes a kind of historically sensitive *negative theology*—intuiting insight without operationally verifying its claims, inferring a God it will not fully describe, and so scoring forms of human flourishing contingent on a divine in-breaking we can only provisionally explore (in time, as liturgy, community, or friendship) and only tentatively define (in story, metaphor, the dialectic of shared intuition and communally accountable rigor).

One can infer from this that there are always centripetal and centrifugal forces at play in both Christian thought and Christian culture.[2] A fulsome description of the Christian message will refuse attempts to subsume one force into the other. To borrow language from Emmanuel Levinas, such a description will be a saying and an unsaying in turn, binding meaning *and* sense. Its instability is this simultaneity. As one reader of Illich, I see no other way into his theology.

I will take a step back from these conclusions here, in order to work back toward them—a bit like a wave on a beach. I'll do this by exploring and extending the way Illich uses Luke 10: 25-37, the so-called Story of the Good Samaritan, as a narrative that displays both the innervating dynamic of the Christian message and, in how it is interpreted, its corruptibility—those centrifugal and centripetal forces.

2 I acknowledge the influence of Mikhail Bakhtin's philosophy of language here, as he describes centrifugal and centripetal forces always at play in culture, language, and ways of making meaning.

Remembering his fondness for the classical rendering of *ethos* as the distance one can walk in a day, this story of a walk from Jerusalem to Jericho is a theological ethos for Illich. By this I mean that it is a world of meanings he inhabits, and which gives character to his theology. That is nowhere more apparent than in his conversations with David Cayley[3]. He returns to the story again and again there, calling it "our guiding image, our guiding *topos*" (227). I'd go so far as to say that the story is so present to Illich that any theologically-sensitive response to him must tend to it, including parts of the story he doesn't explicitly explore but that might be helpful for constructing a view of Christian life convivial with his intuition. By looking more deeply at that story, the generative tensions that wind through Illich's view of Christianity become clearer.

My inquiry has four moves. First is a general discussion of the parable and Illich's use of it. Second is a look at two responses to his use of it, one from within the pages of this periodical by Joey Mokos and another from the philosopher Charles Taylor. Third is a return to the instability Illich senses at the center of the story, considered in light of what Emmanuel Levinas called "the presence of the third."[4] This is an attempt to ask a question that is as unavoidable as it is unanswerable: how to hold the tension between the centrifugal fire of faith and the centripetal demands of society. The parable holds that tension in ways Illich continually explored. Fourth, then, is a little of my own *thinking-with* by giving further detail to a twist Joey Mokos recounts in his response to Illich. That twist re-places the parable into its narrative frame and lets an often-unnoticed rhetorical move in that framing take us even deeper into how meaning and sense, judgment and mercy, responsibility and gratuity, control and contin-

3 *Rivers North of the Future* House of Anansi Press, 2005.

4 See Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981.

gency, justice and love, thinking and prayer might be held together, like a heartbeat. As far as I can tell, the heart of the kind of human flourishing the gospel message imagines beats in this way. I think it is the dynamic of faith that Illich both explored in his work and embodied in his life.

Whether Ivan would agree with my approach in all aspects or not I can't say. But I can ask, in the spirit of a student, for leave to try. In this way, this essay is my own gesture of thanks to this extraordinary teacher.

Walking from Jerusalem to Jericho

In his conversations with David Cayley, Illich credits Hans Blumenberg saying that the insertion of *contingency* into cosmology is a unique contribution of Christianity, replacing antique notions of necessity in being with what amounts to a universalizing of the Hebrew idea of a freely creating God. This insertion made possible the Christian separation of essence and existence (between what things are and *that* they are). Existence is dependent upon the unnecessary (but perhaps inevitable) *act*, or what the tradition calls *grace*, of a creating Other. This is the contingency of existence, bound to a creating relation born of freedom. Illich references Augustine's assertion that God created what is because it pleased God to do so, in a gut-expressing kind of pleasure. "It could just as well be that God would not have made us the gift of bringing this or that thing into existence" (Rivers 66).

Creation, even in its givenness, is in every instant dependent upon a free Other whose inclination toward creation is an overflowing, freeing what is to be. Alongside the idea of *grace*, Illich also calls this *gratuity*. It is the fire whose flames Christianity witnesses and celebrates. It is also the fire whose flames Christianity seeks to harness and control—unleashing dialectics of love and law, gracious praise and deafening silencing, boundary breaking welcome and

suppressing oppression.[5]

These dialectics take a particular turn with the modern era. Making this point, Illich again agrees with Blumenberg, that "the beginning of modernity coincides with an attempt to break out of a world-view defined overwhelmingly by contingency" (Rivers 68). This attempt to overcome contingency is achieved by reducing our dependence on a free act of the Creator to our own acts of self-assertion, unmooring contingency from transcendence. The essential relationality of being human becomes self-referential, not other-oriented.[6] Alterity (otherness) comes to be seen as a product of human consciousness, with difference increasingly taken to be a product of unpredictability, ignorance, or uncontrollability rather than grace. Contingency becomes *chance*, set against the vagaries of time and calling for knowledge, power, and control.

Illich centers the New Testament narrative, often called the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37), as he tells this broad story. Both the narrative itself and in the ways it's been received take the dynamic we're considering back into Christianity's founding texts.

> 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

5 The idea of *gratuity* here is meant as a free expression of grace, given toward and for an other in an act that is both free and freeing. It is not meant in its more modern colloquial use as an arbitrary, flippant, even condescending gesture made by one person to another.

6 Zigmunt Bauman offers an interesting take on the modernization of the idea of responsibility that parallels this, with responsibility classically originating in the demand of the other (and so the pricking of conscience), now originating in the self. Responsibility lies in the other, as we respond to and enter into relationships with. The idea that one has responsibility oneself is uniquely modern, requiring this escape from contingency as traditionally understood. See *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* (Harvard U P, 2008).

> heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor 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 neighbor?" 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 traveling 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 neighbor 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." (Luke 10: 25-37, New Revised Standard version)

First comes an originating question. The young lawyer, well versed in socially and religiously approved ways of interpreting the world, comes to Jesus, restless. He forces a question on Jesus in the form of a dilemma that implies a crack in his confidence: "What must I do to . . .?" This is a question of need, obligation, achievement, and rightly ordered purpose. Jesus' response takes the lawyer back to the source of his confidence (however cracked it was), eliciting his expertise. The lawyer obliges with a schooled recitation: "Love God with all you got, and your neighbor as yourself."

The reply: "Go and do that and you will receive the reward you want." Still uneasy, the lawyer presses a deeper conundrum, which gives rise to our story. It is in his fateful question, "And who is my neighbor?"

So the story Jesus tells. Man on a long road downhill to Jericho. It's an in-between road in contested territory. He falls to thievery, is stripped, beaten, abandoned, left for dead. Stripped, he loses easy indicators of his ethnic, social, economic identity and status. We might infer that being half dead he's also lost clarity of speech, which would render him even less identifiable. Now come the passersby. They are religiously and socially identifiable. We can presume that the first two were pious and purposeful folk, knowing who they were (in contrast to the lawyer, who's searching). They pass the suffering one, even moving to the other side of the road—likely obeying purity laws. (Perhaps better to drop a business card with the phone number of a nearby homeless shelter with support services at his side, or make a 911 call down the road when a signal appears on your cell phone; service-provision is a multi-nodal and complex phenomenon in modern society, after all.)

The Samaritan, of course, does the opposite. He does not pass. He goes *toward*. He leaves the road and bends down to this unidentifiable stranger.[7] He treats and binds his wounds, lifts him up to his level by putting him on his own animal, and escorts him to an "inn"—which Illich was fond to remind us was more likely heard as a brothel, as there were no hotels as we think of hotels today. The Samaritan tends the Jew for the night, and then before leaving he negotiates

7 Presuming the victim to be a Jew, Illich liked to call the Samaritan a Palestinian—with the radical nature of such an encounter on today's Jerusalem-Jericho connecting us to the power of the story in its time. It also suggests something contemporary hearers of the story often miss, but which first century hearers might have heard, which is the personal risk (and fear) the Samaritan might have been taking on by choosing to leave the road to help.

with the innkeeper (the madame?) for the man's continuing care. This includes a down payment on costs and a promise to return to redeem any more debt incurred (and presumably do more if called on).

Jesus asks the lawyer to identify neighborliness in the story he's just heard, to which the lawyer responds from the same place in his gut from which the Samaritan responded. Neighborliness is in the boundary breaking relationship between the Samaritan and the suffering Jew—in his expectation rattling, wasteful, free and spontaneous act of gratuity. It is a hint of the contingency upon which Christian faith rests—not a contingency of *chance*, but one of freely enacted binding. It is gratuity, what Christians want to mean when they speak of grace.

Here also lies the impulse that, as we have said, can be all too easily corrupted (even for good reasons) as it is rationalized, regularized, disseminated, rendered repeatable and scalable, with human connection limited, in what comes to be called Christian charity. Or to those more concerned by the implications of the *freedom* this grace demonstrates, here lies the impulse that must be contained, controlled, returned to a more reliable program. Perhaps a little more policing on the road. Christian compassion demands it, after all. No toxic empathy here.

The history of Christianity, and so of all cultures influenced by Christianity, is a history of struggle over the implications of what happens in this story among that man who fell among the thieves, those two who passed by, the Samaritan who didn't, the innkeeper, our lawyer, and Jesus. And whereas most Christian ethics seems to spend its time between the Samaritan and the two who pass by, Illich sees the essential question of ethics to come out of what happens in the ditch. He describes a kind of ethics that ignores the limits and stratification of organized charity. The fire of faith is in the ditch

(in gratuity and contingency), not on the road (in evaluation and "responsibility"). Prudent distance is burned away by contingent proximity.

This story displays this gratuity in a response of mercy that has no adequately definable purpose other than its own spontaneous expression—irrespective of, and in fact disruptive to, the accepted expectations of moral codes or proper relationships. This is scored in the ditch, *between* the responding one and the suffering one. The parable is misunderstood when read as a lesson about personal responsibility at a distance (I ought to be kinder, or I ought to be less concerned with appearances or deadlines) and not, first, about a call to a way of being.

> What the beaten-up Jew's presence evokes in the Samaritan's belly is a response which is not purposeful but gratuitous and good. And I claim that the recovery of this possibility is the basic issue we are discussing here—the possibility that a beautiful and good life is primarily a life of gratuity, and that gratuity is not something which can flow out of me unless it is opened and challenged through you. (*Rivers* 227)

Two Responses to Illich on the Samaritan

Joey Mokos writes that Illich was trying to "make a point about the surprising nature of love, the inner turning of our guts that precedes mercy, and the radical redefinition of the neighbor that ignores religious, ethnic and tribal limits"[8] Mokos locates the insight Illich offers in Illich's interpretation of what it means to be human, or in what the church calls theological anthropology. The relationship between the Samaritan and the suffering one is an image of the kind of humanity both modeled and made available in the

8 Joey Mokos, "Go and Do Likewise," *Conspiratio*, Spring 2022, p. 200.

Incarnation of the Christ—resonating with the affirmation in the Book of Genesis (1:26) of the human being created in the image of God. So created in the image of a creating God (which for our purposes is less pictorial than it is relational), human being flourishes within an intertwining of ability, contingency, and freedom.

For Mokos, this intertwining puts a high value on our capacity to learn and to make (our ability), on our dependence on others in community (our contingency), and on agency (our freedom). It additionally acknowledges uncontrollability at its core. This also becomes the source of sin I've described—in counterproductive attempts to apply human ability in ways designed to control freedom and eclipse contingency. It is an error to equate a generative event of love with trained and normed systems of road-side assistance or emergency response. This is not to say that the passerby should not bother to make that 911 call. It simply means that we shouldn't pretend that call is something it's not. In its remove from immediacy, sacrifice, and encounter it's neither an act of faith nor an expression of love—even if it is a reasonable thing to do. It remains within what Charles Taylor would call an immanent frame—lacking a sense for the transcendent. The face of the suffering other is reduced to an abstraction incorporated into a system.

In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor offers his own take on Ivan's reading of the Samaritan. He lets Illich remind him of the necessary tension between sociality and the necessary codes and systems of society. Because his reading of Illich is more at the service of social theory than of theology, Taylor tends to reduce Illich's treatment of the parable to that reminder. He discusses how Illich's reading of the parable fits into a larger view of Western history, hearing in Illich's view a warning against over confidence. He also entirely accepts Illich's view that the over confidence to be eschewed

is not only a source of systemic secular violence, but is also the Achilles heel of church history—the *corruptio optimi* referred to above.

> What is Illich telling us? That we should dismantle our code-driven, disciplined, objectified world? Illich was a thoroughgoing radical, and I don't want to blunt his message. I can't claim to speak for him, but this is what I draw from his work. We can't live without codes, legal ones which are essential to the rule of law, moral ones which we have to inculcate in each new generation. But even if we can't fully escape the nomocratic-judicialized-objectified world, it is terribly important to see that that is not all there is, that it is in many ways dehumanizing, alienating; this it often generates dilemma that it cannot see, and in driving forward, acts with great ruthlessness and cruelty. The various modes of political correctness, from Left and Right, illustrate this every day. . . .
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> We should find the center of our spiritual lives beyond the code, deeper than the code, in networks of living concern, which are not to be sacrificed to the code, which must even from time to time subvert it. This message comes out of a certain theology, but it could be heard with profit by everybody. (SA 743)

Being one of the most comprehensive thinkers of our time, striving for a unifying story that makes sense of the contradictions and possibilities of the modern world, Taylor seems haunted by Illich's challenge—not because this challenge counterposes nihilism to comprehension, but because it counterposes contingency to comprehension. Which, of course, is what the Samaritan also does to piety. One thinks of Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel, building palaces of thought

while living in a hut next door. Taylor allows Illich's reading of the story to be an anarchic jester in the court of social theory—which might be exactly where Illich himself positions the gospel in the magisterium.[9]

This way of thinking approaches what the Jewish thinker Franz Rosenzweig meant by "speech-thinking," flipping the priority of interpretation in philosophy from abstracting truth (whether imminent or transcendent) from its living context to rendering understanding in ways that are porous to, and so humbled by, sociality. Sociality interrupts knowledge with traces of an inexplicable transcendence. This is also, most surely, what the inheritor of Rosenzweig's sensibility, Emmanuel Levinas, meant in his own counterpositions: ethics with comprehension, sense with meaning, desire with need, me-ontology with ontology, hearing with seeing—the first of these pairings representing a phenomenon that is experienced (perhaps) but not comprehended. But the pre-thetic quality of that interrupting otherness is not psychological. It is *other*, outside the self.[10] I would suggest that there is a similar phenomenology at work in Illich's theology.

Returning to the Road

Staying with this line of thinking, there is another image from Emmanuel Levinas worth considering. When writing of the interruptive moral urgency of encounter, Levinas cryptically wrote: "The laughter sticks to one's throat when the neighbor approaches—that is, when his face, or his forsakenness, draws near" ("God and Philosophy," in *Collected*

9 For another treatment of Taylor's reading of Illich, see Eric Gregory and Leah Hunt-Hendrix, "Enfleshment and the Time of Ethics: Taylor and Illich on the Parable of the Good Samaritan," in Carlos D. Colorado and Justin D. Klassen, eds. *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age*. Notre Dame UP, 2017, p. 217-239.

10 While there is no room for such an analysis here, it might be useful to investigate ways Ivan's anarchic intuitions join Levinas, Rosenzweig, and Kierkegaard.

Philosophical Papers, 166). The laughter can be taken to be the ontological presumptions of philosophy (and theology) to describe the existence of one thing in terms of another thing, abstracting reality into totalizing concepts. The neighbor, who is any *other* who elicits a response by virtue of facing us, calls us from outside the slumber of our self-same being into a morally charged response-ability. Prior (in priority, if not in time) to becoming aware of a person against the background of how we interpret the world (i.e. understanding them), we experience them as a plea (a demand; a call) for response, a plea that awakens us as moral beings.

The image of the echo comes back to mind. In a way that takes us back to Mokos' evocation of the *imago Dei* (image of God), it is interesting to note that for Levinas the "image of God" is that echo of the transcendent Other in the proximate other. To be "in the image of God" is to be called into being, to be made by, and so to move within this echo. This is the ethos of love we have already called *grace*, which also takes us back to what Illich means by contingency.

If the parable we're discussing is taken as merely a questioning of the passersby (of their *laughter*, if you will), one is left wanting to reform our means of upholding law and providing care. But if the questioning is taken to go to the locus of ethics itself, as it is by Illich, the parable can more easily sustain its challenge to the social order—privileging contingency in spontaneous acts of love that subvert patterns of reduction and so potentially hear the echo of transcendence.

I want to return to that image of the laughter that's interrupted by the neighbor, however. For there is a way to consider that image that can also invert the way Illich's account of contingency haunts Taylor—doubling back on it by taking Illich's account in another direction. For as much as the urgency of "ethics" (in the face of the other) interrupts the abstractions of "philosophy" (the laughter of being), so

also the disruptive "laughter" inserted into abstraction by continency can itself be interrupted by the demands of social life that return. Even as we love spontaneously and fully, with all our heart, soul, and mind, there are moral and social complexities we must yet navigate. Levinas calls this second order interruption the "presence of the third." He also calls it "justice." "Justice is the presence of the third," he writes. The presence of the third demands that we carry the one-to-one gesture of mercy back, however chastened, to the work of norming our lives. The presence of others requires that. But faith wants the return to have a surplus, porous to grace. The demands of general order cannot silence the pleas of specific others (especially when strangers). The work of making life cannot eclipse the gift of life, which we receive from others. So the return looks for a way of living that is simultaneously repeatable and maximally open—sustaining contingency. [11] Levinas uses the metaphor of a *heartbeat* to account for this kind of movement, with the diastole of contingency inseparable from the systole of social life—but with social life now appearing more like a liturgy than system, textured by a studied refusal to collapse one beat into the other, holding the beats together as at one time identical with each other and at the same time wholly separate from each other.[12]

Illich rightly moves our attention from the prevarications on the road to the grace-filled encounter in the ditch. Yet he also follows the Samaritan and the man to the "inn," noting that the breaking of expectations continues even there.

11 Zygmunt Bauman, for whom Levinas' account of ethics functions in a way similar to how Illich's account of contingency functions for Taylor, calls this the "problem" of the third. For Bauman, the basic problem for critical theory in our time is to preserve within the liquid realities of contemporary life what those very realities render nearly impossible to preserve, which is the stable instability (or heartbeat) of ethics put in service to human flourishing. See Bauman, *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers*?

12 See "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987, p. 47-60.

As we've seen, the Samaritan recruits the innkeeper into the work of mercy, plans the victim's care, materially sacrifices to meet the cost, and promises to return. There is no reason to treat this as incidental to the parable. I'd go so far as to suggest that it gives hints as to how to sustain grace in the return to social life—moving mercy toward justice without eclipsing mercy. In the parable, the return to the road brings unexpected alliances mediated by unearned trust, sealed by a promise of continuing relationship. The scene at the "inn" is not a handoff. It is an *entrustment*. And in sealing this entrustment with a promise, we find a new layering of contingency. The world is now ordered by virtue of covenant (mediated by promises) rather than contract (mediated by sanctions). The road returned to is not the road the earlier passersby saw ahead of them. It is the promise of *conviviality*, to use another term from Illich.

Re-framing the Parable, Reframing Theology

We are not finished with this story from Luke. For there is another part of this passage that is relevant to the heartbeat I'm describing. It's a rhetorical move that Illich does not explore. Joey Mokos describes it in his account of a conversation he and I had with Ivan near the end of Ivan's life (Mokos 200). In a diner in Connecticut, near the convent Illich cherished as his place of friendship and retreat, we asked him about a rhetorical flip made by Jesus that mainstream interpretations of the parable, however radical they might be, miss.

To see this move one must shift attention from the parable itself to the back and forth questioning that is its frame. The lawyer asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus responds with the story. He then questions the lawyer in light of the story he's told, "Who was a neighbor to the man who fell among the thieves?" To which the lawyer responds, of

course, "The one who showed him mercy." This is in answer to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" The shift of subject is often missed, or if noticed it's taken to be insignificant. But is it insignificant?

We imagine the lawyer as if one of the passersby, with the parable inviting him to learn from the Samaritan and consider the unidentifiable victim his neighbor. That's fine, of course, but it's not what the narrative does. Jesus asks the lawyer who was a neighbor *to the nameless one who suffered*, not who was a neighbor to the passersby. Jesus thus identifies the lawyer neither with his ethno-religious compatriots nor with the Samaritan, *but with the vulnerable one in the ditch*. This seems to signal that the salvific decision for the lawyer is not to somehow do better when he himself passes by, but to accept that the one (even a stranger) who shows *him* mercy is his neighbor. Who is *my* neighbor? If you can decide who is *the suffering one's neighbor*, you will know.

If you are only able to see yourself in the one with power and so refuse your own powerlessness, your own woundedness, your own desire for a neighbor, you will be lost. For you are not better than one who suffers. We need each other, each powerful and each powerless.

I've borrowed the image of a heartbeat to describe both the simultaneously disruptive and constructive dynamic that Illich seems to place at the center of the Christian message *and* the dynamic that any return to theology within the echo of revelation must preserve at its center. One cannot make that return without decentering one's self in receiving love, in acknowledging creatureliness, in relishing contingency.

The Heart Still Beating

In *Just Mercy*, Harvard educated lawyer, Brian Stevenson, describes his turn away from the rules of the game into which he was trained. He did this by giving his career, and

so also his life, to seeking justice for persons who have been unjustly incarcerated—the majority of whom are persons of color. With this has come an abiding commitment to racial justice and criminal justice reform. By any normal view, he is a living Good Samaritan. Yet in the HBO documentary about him and his work, ostensibly stitching his story into our Samaritan's story, Stevenson himself reframes the question in a way resonant with what we're exploring here.

After the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the execution of intellectually disabled adults is unconstitutional, Stevenson had sought a stay of execution for a client, Jimmy Lee Dill, who was intellectually disabled. Appeal upon appeal failed, ruling that irrespective of the merits of his claim Stevenson was too late. Even a last-minute decision of the very Court that has ruled against such executions denied the requested stay. After a tearful phone call telling Mr. Dill that he could not stop his execution, lawyer Stevenson found himself in despair, feeling he could not go on in his work. In the documentary, he speaks of that night.

> I was sitting there in agony, thinking about why I do what I do. I kept thinking about how broken he was. My clients have been broken by poverty, broken by disability, broken by trauma, broken by bias and discrimination. But what I realized that night, that I never realized before, was that I do what I do because I am broken too.
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> People sometimes say to me, 'Oh, it must be overwhelming and difficult to represent people on death row, to be fighting against the system', and it is. The truth is that if you stand next to the condemned, if you fight for the poor, if you push against systems that are rooted and heavy, if you keep pushing and you keep fighting and you keep doing, you're going to get broken. And what I realized is that I'm part of the broken community. And when

> you realize that, you don't have a choice in standing up for the rights of the other broken. (HBO, "True Justice," 59:00f)

To join the suffering, the vulnerable, the unjustly accused, the dispossessed, the fearful *as a neighbor* is to become a part of the broken community. This is the ethos of faith—the contingency, the grace, the gratuity, the receiving, the particular work that allows those centripetal and centrifugal forces always at play with each other to generate *love*. It allows the *entrustment* I spoke of above. It also allows what Illich describes as a kind of *obedience*. Illich's account of this could have been for Bryan Stevenson, or our Samaritan, or that lawyer Jesus encountered.

> Modern English has lost the word for this kind of trust. The biblical word for it is obedience. Obedience in the biblical sense means unobstructed listening, unconditional readiness to hear, untrammeled disposition to be surprised. It has nothing to do with what we call obedience today, something that always implies submission, and ever so faintly connotes the relationship between ourselves and our dogs. . . .When I listen unconditionally, respectfully, courageously with the readiness to take in the other as a radical surprise, I do something else. I bow, bend over towards the total otherness of someone. But I renounce searching for bridges between the other and me, recognizing that a gulf separates us. Leaning into this chasm makes me aware of the depth of my loneliness, and able to bear it in the light of the substantial likeness between the other and myself. All that reaches me is the other in his word, which I accept on faith. But, by the strength of this word I now can trust myself to walk on the surface, without being engulfed by institutional power. ("Educational Enterprise in Light of the Gospel," Un-

published, November 13, 1988, McCormick Seminary)

When Jesus says, "Go and do likewise," he might not be simply saying "be kinder" (as good as doing that might be). He might be telling his lawyer friend, and so us, to re-imagine it all, even the question itself, from the ditch, and from the "inn," and from the movement from care to *love*.[13]

We search for a locus of meaning on which to pattern our lives. Yet the meaning we seek is elusive, often heard sooner than seen: heard from around a corner, from persons or places we aren't looking for, perhaps from an echo. We find and are found, and—at least for a moment—we lose the need to distinguish between who is speaking and who is listening, or between who is giving and who is receiving.

Ivan was, as Joey Mokos writes, delighted by this conversation. He encouraged more. Perhaps the "more" he encouraged was the kind of conviviality for which theological reflection should strive in response to the instability at its center, to preserve the history of faith (against its corruption) in friendship: theology as the "speech-thinking" of the church enacted in a chastened, promise-filled *heartbeat* of mercy/justice, mercy/justice, mercy/justice—which might be the very kind of faith Jesus welcomed.

13 In *The Expulsion of the Other* (trans. Wieland Hoban, Polity P, 2018), Byung-Chul Han offers a prescription for undoing the solipsism of neoliberal culture that resonates with this message, saying that "what is necessary is once more to consider life from the perspective of the Other, of the relationship with the other, and to afford the Other an ethical precedence—indeed, to relearn the language of responsibility, to listen to the Other and respond (69)." This also resonates with Levinas' notion of "substitution," with the ethical relation signaled by substituting oneself for another, with the other's call becoming more urgent than attention to self. See *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*.