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Luke 10:25-37

There's a funny meme on the internet. It's a beautiful picture of a snowy, tree-lined road, and the caption reads, "Visit Maine for the scenery. Stay because you're stuck in a ditch."

Today's parable is set in a ditch.. What is the nature of a ditch? They are dug on the sides of roads for drainage. Rain runs off from roads where sheep and goats and cattle are driven to pasture: they are wet with smelly, mucky runoff. Spiders, snakes and insects move about in the marshy weeds.

Place yourself in the ditch. You awake in the mud, dazed and wounded, cold and dirty and in pain. Your clothes have been stripped off. Something is broken, your nose or your arm or your leg, or maybe a couple of ribs. Your lip is cut.

My spiritual director recently pointed out a prayer in our prayer book on p. 461. A line of it reads, "If I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly." So here you are lying in a ditch, gallantly.

You are alone, suffering, bleeding, deeply bruised, immobilized by pain, robbed of your money and of your provisions for the journey. You have nothing, neither money, nor food, nor friends, nor health, nor hope of rescue. Imagine your vulnerability.

There's a body in the ditch. A priest and a Levite approach. A Temple priest was not what we would know as a modern day Rabbi or Episcopal priest, preaching and teaching. Priests in biblical times were those who offered sacrifices in the Temple.

Levites were religious functionaries in the Temple who assisted the priests. Levites were members of the Tribe of Levi, inheriting their role.

These are your religious leaders. The people you expect to help you. You are in the ditch and you appear dead and the priest and the Levite pass by. You might not even be aware of who they are, face down in the mud, or you might hear their footsteps approach and when they disappear, you might think, “I am going to die here.”

Many preachers explain that the Priest and the Levite avoid the ditch containing the man who they presume to be dead to avoid ritual impurity. Sometimes Christian interpretation does not do justice to Judaism. Jewish scholar Amy Jill Levine states impurity was a fact of life: the visitors at Lazarus’ tomb became ritually impure, as did Nicodemus preparing Jesus’ body for burial.

Dr. Levine writes that the Babylonian Talmud states, “Our Rabbis taught ‘Give sustenance to the poor of the non-Jews, along with the poor of Israel, visit the sick of the non-Jews, along with the sick of the Israel, bury the dead non-Jews, along with the dead of Israel, do all these things because of the ways of peace’” (Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, 146).

All this to say we can read this parable without a negative depiction of Jewish religious practice. It was not a purity/contamination issue. The religious leaders were just disinterested. Or in a hurry.

Then the Samaritan passes by. Verse 33: *The Samaritan was moved with pity*. Other translations read, “*He had compassion on him.*” Compassion compels the Samaritan to kneel at your injured side. Verse 34: *And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil [a salve] and wine [an antiseptic]. . .*

The Samaritan is a total stranger, from a different region, a different ethnic group. There is mutual animosity between Samaritans and Jews. In the sentences immediately preceding today’s Gospel, Jesus and his disciples, perceived as a rag-tag band of religious nuts, had passed through Samaria and no one would take them in.

In today's reading, it is a Samaritan is kneeling beside a battered man in the weeds, a Jewish man. Jesus is reframing who our neighbor is. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, the neighbor is sacred. Psalm 101 reads,

*One who secretly slanders a neighbor
I will destroy.
A haughty look and an arrogant heart
I will not tolerate. (Psalm 101:5)*

Proverbs tells us we make haste to help our neighbor:

*Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due,
when it is in your power to do it.
Do not say to your neighbor, "Go and come again;
tomorrow I will give it," when you have it with you.
Do not plan harm against your neighbor
who lives trustingly beside you. (Proverbs 3:27-29)*

Scripture has a lot to say about the stranger, too. In Exodus God says,

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 22:21)

In the Letter to the Hebrews, Paul writes, *"Let mutual affection continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them, those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured."* (Hebrews 13:1-3)

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The definition is unbounded: the person in this room several pews over who hurt your feelings 10 years ago, the person who voted for that other party, the person who lets her dog tear up your flowers, the thief, the prisoner, the immigrant.

These are the *other*, and one of them kneels at your side in the ditch attending to your wounds.

Jesus reframes not only expands the idea of neighbor but also of sacrifice. Sacrifice is no longer a matter of the priest offering turtle doves or lambs on our behalf. The path to eternal life is sacrificial love, the sacred duty of each of us to the other. Love is our offering.

What sacrifice did the Samaritan make? He offered up his time, dressing your wounds in the ditch. He offered up his plans, delaying his trip. He offered up his safety, kneeling at the side of the road, preoccupied with your well-being and making himself vulnerable to the same hooligans who attacked you.

Verse 33: *and [the Samaritan] set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.* The Samaritan offers you shelter, the most basic of human needs. A safe place is the first need of recovering from trauma. Here again the sublime profundity of hospitality.

Christian hospitality is not wine and cheese with people we like or a comfortable guest room for our grandchildren; it is hospitality that gets us down in the mud with a stranger, getting his blood on our hands, hospitality that costs. Creating space to embrace and nurture the fragile humanity of another human being, that is Christian hospitality.

The Samaritan offered up his donkey, he offered up his money, leaving 2 denarii with the innkeeper, enough money to cover your lodging at the inn for two months—two months of shelter for healing.

Love kneels in the mud to pour healing balm on another's wounds. Love allows one's plans to be derailed by the urgent need of another.

At the beginning of the parable, the lawyer, a scholar of the Torah, asks Jesus, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus tells this complex story of strangers, then asks the lawyer, “Which of these, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” The lawyer answers, “The one who showed him mercy.”

Love God with your whole being, heart, soul, strength and mind. And then love all those whom God places in your path. Show mercy unto madness. Embrace the other. Entertain angels unawares. Protect the alien. Go.