

“Down in the Ditch in a Time of Social Distancing”

Luke 10:25-37

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3rd Sunday in Lent

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The priest and the Levite didn't stop to help the poor man but I bet they had a good reason. Maybe they were frightened. The robbers may have still been on the loose ready to attack and what good would another victim be to a man lying in a ditch? "I would like to have stopped," I imagined one might have said, "but out of an abundance of caution, I decided to keep moving." "It could have been a trap," another might have said, "so I decided to practice social distancing to keep myself safe."

We don't cut them that kind of slack because Jesus makes it clear that the hero in the story is the Samaritan. The one who doesn't have the excuses. The one who is willing to get in the ditch with the poor man. Like many of you, I've internalized this story since I was very young. It's one of the first stories I remember probably because the lesson is so clear and so relevant. You want to love your neighbors? Then find the people who are hurting and help them out. You want to know who Jesus respects the most? It's not the religious authorities or anyone else with a title. It's the people who do the healing, who offer the help, who give themselves for the sake of others.

That's the lesson I've lived with for my whole life. So when this virus started spreading I thought the heroic thing, the loving thing was going to be getting down in the ditch with the people in those high risk groups - those of us over 60 and people who have serious medical conditions like heart disease, lung disease, or diabetes. We've got to be ready, I thought, to put ourselves at risk and get in the ditch with the people who most need our help. To consort with the people who are most isolated.

It makes sense that this was my reflexive conviction. It's a conviction that permeates the New Testament. You can see it when Jesus isn't afraid to get close to lepers, or hemorrhaging women, or people with evil spirits or the kinds of mental illness that makes them anathema to others. It's the heroic kind of Christianity that kept the Church alive and growing during the periods of its greatest persecution. In the days of the early church, a plague of dysentery racked the Roman empire. When people contracted dysentery they were put out of their homes and left for dead. In the midst of this, Christians would take in those with dysentery, keep them warm and give them fluids--which is in fact the treatment for dysentery. It turned out to be the greatest evangelism effort of the early church. People thought it was a miracle. It was simply loving care - offering to those who most needed it when others were afraid.

I thought about that this week as we all learned more than I ever thought I'd know about any virus. My first inclination about church was the similar to the way I think about storms or snowfall or earthquakes. Lots of people might need to stay home to protect their own safety, I reasoned, but we're going to keep the church open. Worship is going to happen. Babies are going to be baptized. Meals are going to stay on wheels. Children are going to get tutored. Mayoral candidates are going to be met with the people's agenda. We're going to demonstrate our faithfulness through our endurance, our fearlessness in the face of illness. We're going to be proud of the way the church gets down in the ditch with those who need us the most.

And then we all started learning about this illness. About that dreaded epidemiological curve that shows that the real issue that we are facing - indeed that the world is facing is the point at which this illness could infect so many people that the healthcare system itself becomes overwhelmed. The numbers are shocking. Without any intervention, some estimates say, nearly 10 million fellow citizens could die.¹ The best way to address this illness, the public health experts tell us is not by the heroic caretaking of people who are willing to risk themselves for the benefit of others - not for most of us, not initially. The best way to show our love is to stay away from those most at risk; to limit gatherings; to practice great hygiene, to reach out to others in ways that do not involve touch. To get down in the ditch by staying home.

And that's hard to accept because it makes us seem a lot more like the priest and the Levite. The ones who avoid the suffering man out of an abundance of caution. The ones who cross the street to practice social distancing. The ones who sprint, not stay, who run not remedy, who hightail it instead of healing. It doesn't sit well with me, especially at a time in our city when so many people were already suffering. More than 800 people died from overdose deaths last year. Panhandling on every corner. Young people in need of food, work, or basic hope for a future. It seems like another way for us to withdraw into our worlds, distance ourselves from distress, isolate ourselves from injury, seclude ourselves from suffering.

That's what's happened too many times in the past as David Brooks pointed out this week. 1348 Florence, Italy: fathers and mothers abandoned their own children, to the plague that devastated their community. 1665 London epidemic: it was a time, to quote one writer, "when every one's private safety lay so near them they had no room to pity the distresses of others. ... The danger of immediate death to ourselves, took away all bonds of love, all concern for one another." These pandemics brought out the worst of societies, Brooks, observed with the notable exception of health care workers who gave their lives in many instances for the sake of people abandoned by their

¹ "Flattening the Coronavirus Curve," *New York Times*, March 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/11/science/coronavirus-curve-mitigation-infection.html?searchResultPosition=5>

communities. Brooks speculates that this may be why the 1918 Spanish flu that killed over half a million Americans was so quickly forgotten, while World War I which killed a tenth as many Americans was so remembered. The pandemic was a shameful time that most people wanted to forget.²

So if getting down in the ditch with the people who are most vulnerable means staying home right now, then the real question for the church is how do we maintain and expand the solidarity that is behind that social distancing? How do we let loving care remain the litmus test for all of our decision-making? I think the first way is by recognizing that what this pandemic asks from the church is not really that much different from what is asked at any other point in history. God is always inviting us to expand our solidarity with others, which is the way the God of Israel and Jesus define being a good neighbor. We're always called to let loving care remain the litmus test for our decision-making. What's changed is not God's charge to us, it's the environment in which it's happening. Meaning that as church we always have to be interpreting the specific actions that we are called to take into the new environment in which we find ourselves.

This is what rabbi Jesus was doing. He took the law of love right out of Leviticus which is an interpretation itself of the ten commandments, and interpreted it in light of the world in which he lived, often pushing back against the rigidity of religious leadership. If I've learned anything this week, the church has to stay nimble as we interpret the law of love in our changing environment. The fact that as recently as Tuesday we were all preparing for a guest preacher, with a post worship history lunch, and 5 days later here we all are worshiping on Zoom for the first time ever says a lot about our capacity to adjust and adapt. But it's not just logistics that I'm thinking about. The Session met early Thursday morning by Zoom call and one of the decisions we made was to close the facilities to all groups except for Alcoholics Anonymous. The guiding value, we decided, was healing. And those in recovery in our leadership told us the most unhealthy, dangerous thing we could do in a city with 800 overdose deaths last year at a time of high stress is shut down AA. So we adapted with a larger meeting space for social distancing, surfaces to be cleaned before and after, hands to be washed. This week we got an email from one of the leaders of that group expressing deep appreciation for a church that is supporting their wellbeing. Recognizing that our decision was a judgment call this person wrote, "it seems to me that this is a true example of Christ's love in action." Love is the litmus test, healing the guiding value.

Which brings me to a second observation - that this wilderness time that we are in is beginning to look like an incredible opportunity for the church to be the church. This afternoon, a small group of elders and deacons will be meeting to discuss

² David Brooks, "Pandemics Kill Compassion, Too," *New York Times*, March 12, 2020.

additional ways we can deepen our relationships in an organized way. That's right - we're looking at this time in the life of the church to deepen our relationships and not just for the sake of our internal life together. The truth is that we don't know what needs are going to arise in our community over the next month. We don't know the healing that will be needed, the hunger that will need to be fed, the connections that will need to be made. New ways of organizing our life together can make us stronger if we are open to them. And while there are good reasons not to gather in groups in the flesh, there are no restrictions to connecting with each other more deeply than we have before.

That's a big part of this parable - Jesus is pushing his own people to be open to the possibility of new relationships. Samaritans, after all, were enemies of Jews and vice-versa. Some of us were taught that Samaritans were the underdogs, even oppressed people. But that's not accurate. To reinforce this point, in the chapter just before this one, Luke tells the story of a Samaritan village that rejects Jesus and his message. James and John ask Jesus if they can rain down fire from heaven. Samaritans weren't saints. As a whole, these texts would argue, they were no better, no worse than their Jewish cousins.³ So here Jesus challenges his disciples - can you be open to the possibility that your enemies could be your friends? Can you allow your imagination to lead you beyond your constricted view of what's possible in our city, in our world, in your life? Can you be open to love that finds its way across boundaries and borders that you didn't imagine being able to cross in your school, in your neighborhood, in your life?

That's the question for us in these disrupted times. How do we go on loving? Yes. But more than that - can you see that God is already working a new thing in the life of our community in the middle of this wilderness? Can you see that when so much of what is familiar is stripped away, it might also be easier to see just what God is up to in your life, in mine, in our life together? Because once we begin to see God's getting in the ditches of the places where we live with people who need it the most, we'll have a better sense of how we can join God there.

³ Amy-Jill Levine points out that the standard interpretation of Samaritans as the underdog often depend on unfair characterizations of Judaism as "legalistic." Some commentators have interpreted the religious leaders' aversion to the Jewish man as based on "purity codes," which is nowhere named in the text and based on erroneous readings of the law. See Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, (New York: HarperCollins), 2006, pp. 144-149.