

**First Congregational Church, Camden, ME**

**"In the Ditch" Luke 10: 23-37**

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1. -- Inherited a sketch, old broken frame -- shrimp boat
  - "the frame matters"
  - > reading scripture - look at frame.
    - don't rush too soon, thinking you want to get to the point. you might miss it.
    - "Insights sometimes lurk in the frame."
  
2. Let's try that out
  - Jesus privately to disciples:
    - "You're fortunate to see more. Lots of folk who pretend to know, sure they got it, well trained to think they know more, . . . don't. They want to, but miss it."
  
  - Someone stands up in the crowd: --> lawyer to test Jesus
    - . . . assume sincerity
  
    - his urgent question: *What do I need to do to get it right . . . ?*
      - Jesus: "Tell me what you know. Recite rules of the road"
      - "Love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."
  
      - "You got it! Why are you testing me?"
  
      - lawyer double down on the head part.
        - "How am I to think about this, interpret this, operationalize this in the real world???
        - I mean, in a complex industrialized, systems-based, power-politics based urbanized and bureaucratized contemporary society, love is variegated and complex action with significant ethical ambiguity . . . I mean, '**who is my neighbor?**'"

== OK, the FRAME! AT LEAST HALF OF IT.

- AND JESUS RESPONDS WITH THAT STORY

- PARSE THE STORY

  - man ambushed. - stripped, beaten, left for dead in DITCH
  
  - a) Up on ROAD - good folk pass by
    - good UCC folk, or Presbyterians. Religious folk in any case. With responsibilities. Knowing their place, and their limits, and the big picture.
      - [don't know this guy. not my fault, so not my obligation, safety [human shields...] etc.]
      - [somebody else. call 911. etc.]
  
    - > then the Samaritan . . . .
      - stranger, enemy, belittled. Ivan Illich: the Palestinian
      - he helps.

--> **most readings stop there**, . . . thinking that the whole thing is about what happens on the road (the SAMARITAN choosing to help.

We even name the parable after the Samaritan, and hospitals [Phoenix: "Good Sam"], and laws, and more.

- we stay up on the road, watching the 3, and writing ourselves into what happened there. What would you do up on that road???

- not a bad questions . . . but . . . WHAT IF WE READ THE WHOLE THING? WHAT IF JESUS WANTS HIS LAWYER TO THINK ABOUT MORE THAN THE HIGH ROAD?? --> IN THE DITCH

b) DITCH -

--> relationship

(spontaneous, leaning toward, touching, sacrificing, risking, helping, overcoming all of the rules, and labels, and boundaries, and such . . . )

c) -- REST OF THE STORY: [the return to the road]

- donkey

- "inn" - brothel?

- *relationship* with the "innkeeper" ("You're now part of the story," he seems to say to her)

-- an *entrustment*

- *open-ended promise to return*

- NO ENDING, NO LIMIT: "I will return. I will pay."

- Innkeeper accepts the task - no questions asked

(- Rabbinic story of Israel taking "God's way" without asking for description, boundaries, calculations)

---> **covenant**, not contract

-- OK. Hold all of that, .... as we go BACK TO THE FRAME

- Remember what prompted story now!:

- LAWYER'S QUESTION: "Who is MY neighbor."

- JESUS FOLLOW-UP, USING HIS STORY:

"Who was a neighbor TO THE ONE IN THE DITCH

---> " " Where is Jesus putting our earnest lawyer?

The road? Or the ditch?

JESUS IS REFRAMING THE QUESTION ALTOGETHER.

HUMBLING OUR LAWYER.

ASKING OUR LAWYER TO LOOK INSIDE, NOT JUST OUTSIDE.

LOVE IS NOT A CONTRACT.

LOVE IS A COVENANT--

THAT CHANGES EVERYONE,

BLURRS LINES,

THAT TAKES US *DOWN* SO WE CAN COME BACK UP;

ASKS US TO LOOK *IN* SO WE CAN COME BACK OUT;

ASKS US TO GO *THROUGH* SO WE CAN COME BACK TO--IN A NEW WAY

IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT OUR ACTIONS; IT'S ABOUT OUR HEARTS

You might know the story of Bryan Stevenson. The movie *Just Mercy* tells it, based on his own book with the same title.

A young lawyer--intelligent, achievement oriented, Harvard educated, set on the road to success, he got his head turned from the road ahead to what was happening in the ditch. In his case, it was to victims of an unfair, racialized, justice system in his home state of Alabama. A short stint doing public interest law, meant to be part of his road to worldly success--became a life's vocation. Tending to victims. Freeing unjustly incarcerated. Calling attention to deep, lasting, harms to real people in our world of definitions, and procedures, and policies, and rules, and hierarchies, and systems.

By any normal view, Bryan Stevenson is a living Good Samaritan.

An HBO documentary about him and his work, called "True Justice" goes out of its way to paint him that way.

But there's a moment in that documentary when Stevenson reframes it all, telling his story in a very different way--inspired by his own Christian faith.

It comes after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the execution of intellectually disabled adults is unconstitutional. Stevenson sought a stay of execution for Jimmy Lee Dill, a client of his on death row who was intellectually disabled.

Appeal upon appeal failed, with rulings that despite the merits of his claim Stevenson was just too late. Even a last-minute decision of the very Supreme 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, Stevenson found himself in deep despair, feeling like he just couldn't go on in his work.

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.

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)

From the road to the ditch. Unable to give help, truly, faithfully, lovingly, until he himself learned that he is in the ditch, too--able to give mercy because he has received mercy. Able to honor, not just pity; respect, not just help; love, not just care.

And there is change in him. His work seems to become more focused. More power. More energy. More joy. Simpler purpose.

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--a single humanity, equal in our need and in our gifts.

The older I get the more I believe that the distances between each one of us, as long as those distances can be sometimes, are all, by any measurement, far shorter than the distance between all of us and the Love that Created us. We can't divide up that love and give more of it to some than we do to others, or keep enough of it for ourselves to be sure we're safe. That's just not how it works. If our Christian theology tells us anything, it's that this very love that multiplies and spreads and grows when it's spent, is ONE.

We don't start the life of faith on the road. We start in the ditch, and let love, grace, sacrifice, laughter, effort, openness, commitment, forgiveness, energy, **hope** carry us back up to the road--and onto a whole new kind of journey.

When Jesus says, "Go and do likewise," he might be saying more than just "be kinder" (as good as being kind is).

He might be telling his lawyer friend, and so each one of us, to *re-think it all*, even the question itself.

Moving from care to *love*.

From doing good (as good as that might be), to living faithfully and fully.

From being responsible (as important as being responsible is) to being whole, and humble, and open, and joyful.

It's about being open to the love that holds us all,

and sweeps us all in,

and breaks down the differences we build to protect ourselves

--turning all of our faces, together, toward the One whose mercy everyone, and everything, depends.

The frame of faith.

AMEN.