

A View from the Ditch
Luke 10:25-37
March 11, 2007

Setting: A ditch on the Road to Jericho – the year 30 Common Era

(Moan, Groan) Ouch! Oh, I ache all over. Those guys beat me good. I can hardly move. Here I am in this ditch. I wonder if anybody will see me. Will I ever get out of here?

I really blew it. They always told me to walk with a buddy on this road. You should never go out into the wilderness alone. This road has a reputation for being dangerous. In the 17 miles from Jerusalem to Jericho it descends over 3,000 feet. That's pretty steep. Lots of switchbacks. This rugged terrain has plenty of hiding places for bandits. They were sure looking out for me today.

I hear something. Someone is there, on the road. I hear him speaking; it's prayers he's saying. It's a man of God. Help has come. Surely he will rescue me. (pause) He's praying for me. His voice is trailing off. He's leaving me here alone...abandoned. I can't believe it. I thought you could always trust a man of God to give a helping hand. All I got is a prayer.

It could be a long wait. If I had come with a buddy, he could have gone ahead to get some help. Now I'm at the mercy of strangers. I hear another one. I smell incense from the temple. He must be a man of God, too. Surely this one will help.

He's mumbling things I can hardly understand. "Mustn't touch; might be dead." Hey, I'm not dead. I may look like it, but I'm alive. Come closer; I'm breathing. He says, "Call 911 when I find a telephone. Got it marked on GPS." That's it. He's gone. What did he mean – 911, telephone, GPS? I must be hallucinating.

Perhaps I should just give up, say my prayers and ask God to forgive my foolishness. I've had a great life until now. I was hoping it would last longer, but I blew it.

Wait, there's another voice out there. Uh-oh! Trouble's here – as if I don't have enough. I can tell by the accent that this one's a Samaritan, our greatest enemy. There's no way that he will stop and help me, a Jew. I'm done for now. If the holy guys wouldn't even help, there is no way I will receive any good from a Samaritan. Our people have hated one another for years. He's coming closer; I can feel it. He's coming in for the final blow. "Good-bye, life! It's been great!"

Oh! That stings, but it's not the attack I expected. He's pouring wine in my wounds to clean them. This isn't at all what I expected from a Samaritan. Now he's pouring oil on my bruises and massaging it into my skin. Oh, that feels so good. He's wrapping my wounds with cloth bandages. He is really taking care of me. What have I done to deserve this mercy from my enemy? I sense his animal drawing near. Amazing that I can hear and smell even though I'm only half conscious. His arms come under my back and legs, lifting me up, laying me on the animal. It hurts to be moved, but I'm so grateful to be getting out of the ditch. Anywhere is better than there. The methodic plodding of the donkey lulls me off to sleep.....

I'm coming to. I'm in a building. There's water for me to drink. Someone is stirring. He comes to greet me. "I'm the innkeeper," he says. "Your friend had to continue on the journey, but I promised to care for you. He left enough money to pay your room and board for a week, and he will pay more if necessary."

My friend. My nameless, faceless friend. No longer an enemy. The Samaritan is my friend. He saved my life. He stooped into that ditch, not to attack me, but to rescue me. And now here I am recovering in the inn, cared for by the gracious hospitality of the innkeeper, and the unknown Samaritan is paying the cost.

Why did he rescue me? He could have passed by, ignoring me just like the others. He would have had a good excuse for not getting involved – his people don't associate with my kind. But he crossed that boundary. He even came down into the ditch where I was a bloody mess and he cleaned my wounds. He could have become contaminated by my blood, but he was willing to take that risk.

I believe that two things stirred the stranger to aid me in my distress. He has a view of the world beyond himself. He is not simply focused on his own needs and agenda. He has a bigger picture of life and recognizes that other people are a part of his world. He wants to be in relationship with other people. He isn't self-centered; he pays attention to the needs of others. He is on the lookout for people to whom he can relate and even those who need his help.

It's easy to tune other people out. In your day you have those gadgets that you stick in your ears. They make you be oblivious to the people around you. Your pastor had some in her ears the other day. Someone spoke to her before she could pull them out and, embarrassed, she had to say, "I'm sorry, I didn't hear what you said to me."

That Samaritan has a larger view of the world so that he saw me and he paid attention to my needs.

The second thing that moved the Samaritan to help me was empathy. He knows what it is like to be an outcast. His people haven't been liked by my people for years. We bully them, and they bully us. We've been pretty mean to one another. Given the history of animosity between our people, he could have ignored me and walked on by. Or out of bitterness he could have taken advantage of the opportunity to finish me off. No one would have known; it was a chance to let off some steam.

Instead he chose the more caring response because he felt my suffering. He knew what it felt like to be kicked around. He saw how badly wounded I was and he felt my pain. His anger wasn't at me; he was angry that a human being would be beaten as I was. Feeling my hurt led him to act on my behalf.

His actions saved my life. He bandaged my wounds, took me to a safe place, and even paid for my room and board. His acts of kindness were contagious, for the innkeeper has shown me great compassion in my benefactor's absence. The innkeeper keeps shaking his head, saying that he has never seen anything like it, an enemy caring for an enemy. I think it's working on his heart.

This whole experience is certainly doing a number on my outlook on life and people. I'll never look at a Samaritan with hatred again, for one of their brothers saved my life. I'll look at every human life differently from now on, for everyone has been battered and beaten, if not with sticks and clubs, then with words or neglect. Every one needs attention, to have someone feel their hurt, and do something to help.

That Samaritan looked at me. He felt for me. He acted on my behalf. They were three simple tasks, but for me, they were a matter of life and death.

I will be forever grateful to this Samaritan. I will make our story known as broadly as I can so that others are inspired to act with the kindness and compassion he offered to me. I will always remember the day that he was willing to come down into the dirty ditch and save my life. Praise be to God!

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