

THE STORY OF A MAN IN A DITCH

Matthew 20:20-28

Luke 10:25-37

In the past couple of weeks, a hilarious and highly effective commercial has appeared regularly on nearly every sports channel. It's an ad for a certain type of television. But I'm inclined to think that the person who wrote it knew Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan.

Here's the commercial without the visuals that go with it:

- When your cable company keeps you on hold, you get angry;
- And when you get angry, you blow off steam;
- And when you blow off steam, you go to the gym;
- And when you go to the gym, accidents happen;
- And when accidents happen, you get an eye patch;
- And when you get an eye patch, people will think you're tough;
- And when people think you're tough, they'll want to know how tough;
- And when people want to know how tough; you'll wake up in a roadside ditch.
- Don't end up in a roadside ditch
- (Get rid of your cable and upgrade to our system)

I guess the Samaritan in Jesus' parable hadn't seen the TV pitch, because he ended up in a roadside ditch. But to understand this parable simply as a story of one injured man lying nearly dead at the side of the road is to miss the whole reason Jesus told the parable. There are really a whole bunch of lessons to take from this famous story in Luke. And among them is this:

IN THE STORY OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN WE SEE THE PLIGHT OF ALL HUMANITY. The story of the man in the ditch is about YOU. It's about ME! It's about ALL OF US! We are all needy people. Some of us and our neighbors are needy in physical terms – sick, hurt and bleeding. Some of us and our neighbors are needy in material terms – not knowing where food and rent money are going to come from, to say nothing of money to buy medicine. But we are ALL needy in spiritual terms. That's why the first part of our worship liturgy is so important. The prayer of confession acknowledges our need – our sin – and accepts God's healing word of forgiveness through Jesus Christ our Lord.

We mustn't think this story is simply about stopping the car when we see someone holding up a "help me" sign by the roadside and giving him or her a dollar. That's much too easy. It's about the women and men we work with, and the teenager living next door, and the elderly woman with the stooped shoulders pushing a walker, and the business man in the tailored suit who seems to have life by the tail. Because, in our heart of hearts, we know that all of us are in need. We all have a part of us that is bruised and battered and bleeding, and needs the help of a Good Samaritan.

The late Ruth Graham (Billy's wife) in her book entitled "Legacy of a Pack Rat", reports about an unnamed but well-known community leader who was found dead drunk – in public. The story is told from the memory of a teenaged boy, now grown and the pastor of a large church. The boy – Allen – tells how his wealthy father sent a chauffeured limousine to pick the man up and bring him to their elegant home. Allen noticed with some concern that his mother had prepared the

big guest room. There were fresh flowers on the dresser. And to Allen's amazement he saw that his mother had made up the handsome four-poster bed with real linen hemstitched sheets and monogrammed linen pillowcases. Allen protested to his mother that she knew nothing at all about drunks – that he would get sick and ruin her good bed sheets and antique bedspread.

Looking at her perturbed son, his mother said seriously, “Son, when he wakes up, he'll feel sick, lonely and ashamed. It is important for him to see immediately that he is our honored guest and that we gave him our very best.” She knew this man in his disgrace would need all the encouragement he could get. He was a leader in his community, but he was a very needy person. And so are we all in some way or another. In the story of the Good Samaritan we see the essential plight of every person on this earth. Sin is a universal problem which none of us escapes.

And, in this story we also see something else. We see **THE WONDER OF SELF-GIVING LOVE**. “Agape”, the Bible calls it – love that is given with no expectation of repayment or reward. Love like that is mighty rare in this greed soaked world.

Ron Lee Davis tells about a friend of his named Bob Osborne. Bob was the co-manager of the First Presbyterian Church Thrift Shop in Fresno, California. He's a man with a tender heart for people. Bob has traveled to Africa and India to see human need firsthand and to do whatever he can to meet those needs. Bob doesn't think of himself as a missionary. Rather, he thinks he's an ordinary Christian in an ordinary American church, who happens to care about suffering people. Davis says he has stood with Osborne in the dusty street of an African village and seen tears roll down Bob's face because his heart was broken over the misery of men, women and little children devastated by ground-cracking famine.

On one trip to India, Bob stuffed as many pairs of shoes in his suitcase as would fit. Shoes are a rare commodity in India, and Bob planned to leave as many pairs as possible with those who needed them. On the return flight, Bob was barefooted. He had taken the shoes off his own feet and given them to an Indian farmer.

There are such people in the world. People who give of themselves to help others. In this story, Jesus shows us the plight of humanity broken and bleeding in a ditch. And in the person of the Good Samaritan, Jesus tells us about self-giving Agape love.

Thirdly, we are reminded that **ONCE UPON A TIME WE LAY BY THE ROAD**. Here is where grace enters the picture.

All of us know the core lesson of this ancient parable. We are to help people in need. Regardless of their religion, their race or their national origin, we are to stop and try to help them. But where does the power for such selfless love come from? It comes from recognizing that once upon a time when we least expected it or deserved it – while we were yet sinners – Christ died for us. It is our broken and bleeding body over which the hero of the parable hovers. Unless we see that we have been recipients of that kind of selfless, agape love in Jesus Christ, we will never be able to share that love with others.

Years ago there was a sacred song titled *The Bird With The Broken Wing*. It was written by Hezekiah Butterworth. It ended with these doleful lines:

But the bird with the broken pinion,
Never soared as high again.

The message of the song was obviously intended to be that for the wounded bird, whose very life depended on his wings, only a life of limitation and frustration lay ahead. That was the penalty of sin. The possibility of soaring into the blue was gone forever.

The words of the song were set to music by Peter Bilhorn, a popular American singing evangelist. On one occasion Bilhorn sang it in the Iowa state prison. When he finished the song, one of the convicts stood and asked the prison chaplain, who was conducting the worship service, "Chaplain, is that true? If what he has been singing is true, there is no hope for me or for the lot of us here." The convict resumed his seat with a sob.

Peter Bilhorn realized the validity of the man's deeply felt protest, but it was too late to explain. He returned to his home with the realization that the convict was right and the song was wrong. Did Scripture not say, "Where sin increased, grace increased all the more?" (Romans 5:20) A few days later Peter Bilhorn added two verses to the song to correct the logical error. Now the song ended like this:

But the soul that comes to Jesus
Is saved from every sin.
And the heart that fully trusts Him
Shall a crown of glory win.

Then comes the dear Redeemer
To cleanse from every stain.
By the grace He freely gives you
You shall soar as high again.

Now the song was correct. There was hope after all. Bilhorn went back to that prison and sang the song again – with the new ending. But that is not the end of the story. Almost twenty years later, a Lt Colonel in the US Army approached Mr. Bilhorn at a YMCA gathering.

"You don't remember me, but I remember you," the colonel said. "You visited Fort Madison prison in Iowa eighteen years ago, and sang about a bird with a broken wing. I am the man who asked you if it was true. Then you came again and sang the added verses and I gave my heart to Christ. By God's Grace, I have been able to rise."

This then, is the message, inherent in Jesus' ancient parable: All of humanity is in need. Along comes one whose self-giving love can meet that need. And now we can soar on mended wings.

Those who have experienced that self-giving love can go from this place "to share God's love, embrace our neighbors and nurture each other".

Thanks be to God.

Amen.