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Pentecost 7/C Luke 10:25-37

## DITCHED

By instant satellite communication, I witnessed a transformative moment at the Soccer (Football) World Cup in South Africa last week. Teams from two different nations had just played their hearts and bodies out in a very close match. The play was fast, aggressive, acrobatic, and intensely focused. In the end, one team lost and another won. The joy of the victors was contagious. The grief of the losing team was equally powerful in its poignancy. One of their players, perhaps the captain, was inconsolable, wandering around with tears streaming down his cheeks. He was quickly surrounded by a huddle of the winners. They touched him on the cheek, patted his back, and hugged him, even as he continued to move in his unbalanced dance of grief. There was nothing pro forma about the empathy the winners had for their heartbroken opponent. It was real. They cared for him

in a way that transformed the competition from a win-lose contest to something much grander, bigger, even holy.

In the imagery of today's parable, the soccer victors saw the man in the ditch and responded immediately with compassion.

A lawyer puts forth a question to "test" Jesus. What kind of test did he have in mind? To show up Jesus? To prove he was a heretic? We don't know. He asks, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Usually, an inheritance is in the control of the giver not the receiver. This man, however, wants to know what *he* has to *do* to gain a good seat in the hereafter. He wants to get the rules right.

((The familiar story about Martha and Mary that directly follows this one makes a stunning contrast. Mary is *not* doing anything. She just sits at Jesus' feet and is. While the lawyer plans ahead and looks towards salvation in the future based upon right actions, Mary finds an experience of eternal life right

then and there in the now, the present moment, not doing a thing.))

Responding to the lawyer, Jesus asks him what the Law (Torah) teaches. The man answers correctly, “You shall love the Lord your 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.”

Then comes an unexpected turn. Being a lawyer, the man is interested in details. So he asks Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” He poses this question “to justify himself”. Why? This expert in religious law knows that there are individuals and classes of people who are not pure or “clean” whom it would be impossible to love as “neighbors”. Perhaps he is hoping Jesus will give him a legal justification for limiting his “neighbors” to a select few. Perhaps he wants to find out what the minimum acceptable definition of neighbor is in order to remain within the safe circle of orthodoxy and orthopraxis. Surely the tax collectors, gentiles, the sick, menstruating women, the dying or dead are not folks he would see as “neighbors”.

To his question, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus tells a story, and it blows out of the water all dualistic classifications of insiders and outsiders, “hostiles” and “friendlys”. Taken seriously, his parable challenges our most dug-in prejudices and cherished antipathies; our tenacious and perilous proclivity to divide the world into good guys and bad guys. At the heart of the Christian faith lies a muscular challenge to de-classify and de-potentiate all codes applying to sectarian, religious, class, gender, economic and political categories. There is no “other”, no alien, no stranger. Paul writes inspiringly, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” This was and still is a revolutionary idea. We are still tempted towards the smaller definition of “neighbor”. We still tend to define who we are by whom we dislike. We are still inclined to take the parts of ourselves we deem unlovable and project them onto other groups or individuals. After all, that is easier than truly loving ourselves.

Who is “the other” in your life? In mine? Giving up the habit of designating other groups of human beings

as the “other” is as hard as pulling up the stubborn roots of the bittersweet vine in our fields; as hard as achieving peace in the middle east or ending acts of violent retribution between urban gangs.

Hard yet not impossible. Hear the parable.

A man was walking down from the hill country of Jerusalem (2400') to Jericho (800' below sea level). On the way, he "fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead." Why did the robbers strip him of his clothes? Were they so desperately poor they needed the clothes for themselves? Did they want to shame the man? Or were they just that violent? Without any clothes the wounds of the victim would be easy to see. Any passerby could see the blood on his body. Since the road to Jericho was in Jewish territory, it is likely that the victim was Jewish, though to others his lack of clothing would render him unidentifiable, without ethnic or religious identity, just a human being; could be any man or woman, or child, lying in the ditch, half-dead. And the ditch could be anywhere in the world.

By chance, a priest was going down that same road. When he saw man in the ditch, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. Was it the purity code with its implacable demands for not touching anything “unclean” that drove them to the other side? The blood on the man was unclean. The fact that he was dying would also present purity dilemma. Why was it necessary to go to the other side? They could have passed by on his side without touching him. Was it guilt or some moral awakening, wrestling with orthodoxy, which caused them to distance themselves? How are we like the Priest and Levite, our eyes seeing what we want to see, our footsteps driving us along an inflexible path? But this story is not really about being too busy. It is about seeing or not seeing.

When the Samaritan who is traveling comes near and sees the man, he is moved with compassion. All three travelers “see” the naked, battered man, but the Samaritan’s seeing is not blinded by purity codes or fear. He sees clearly that a human being is in the ditch and could easily die without help. The Samaritan

is not in his home territory. From the Priest and Levite's point of view, the Samaritan is "the other", a "dark sheep", an infidel, a stray and outcast member of the Jewish family. Long ago, Samaritans abandoned what Jewish authorities held to be the true fold. Since that time Samaritans been estranged from the orthodox religious community in Jerusalem.

The fact that the hero of this story is a Samaritan must have shocked the lawyer who asked the question, "And who is my neighbor?" When he sees the wounded man, the Samaritan pours oil into the wounds for healing, pours wine on them to clean them, binds the wounds with bandages, and puts him on his own beast. His actions resemble those of a nurse, a healer, shaman or priest. His is no passing act of kindness. He more than goes the extra mile. After giving over his own means of transport, the Samaritan takes him to an inn, takes care of him there, asks the innkeeper to look out for him, gives the innkeeper two days wages for expenses, asks the same to keep track of the charges, and promises that he will come back to see the victim and pay for the bill. Outwardly, the man whose life he saves is a total stranger to him, yet at another deeper level he is not a stranger at all, more like a brother. There is no

doctrine or code to blur his seeing. He has had no retina transplant to give him an edge. He did not see a Jew or a Samaritan, an Israeli or Palestinian, a Talibani or American. He did not see “the other”. He just saw his neighbor and treated him without calculation.

Ironically, this parable anticipates the time when Jesus himself will be stripped, severely beaten and then robbed of his life.

When have you felt beaten, robbed and abandoned “in the ditch”? The ditch could be a time or place where you felt your soul or body to be in grave danger. What was your hope or expectation lying there? Did you think you would survive to see the open sky again? It would be too easy to say that in the parable the Samaritan represents God. That would place God “out there”, a distant God who intervenes at certain moments, but not at others. Nevertheless, the Samaritan shows a tender respect for human life that sounds a lot like God. Jesus, however, is pushing his listeners to see that this heart of compassion resides in each of them.

When have you found yourself hanging on to a thread of life and then been totally surprised by the care and love given by a perfect stranger, a Samaritan, the last person in the world you expected to come to your rescue?

When have you been that perfect stranger to another?

### **Luke 10:25-37**

*<sup>25</sup> Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" <sup>26</sup> He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" <sup>27</sup> He answered, "You shall love the Lord your 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." <sup>28</sup> And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." <sup>29</sup> But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" <sup>30</sup> Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him,*

*and went away, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup> Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup> So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. <sup>34</sup> He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. <sup>35</sup> The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' <sup>36</sup> Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" <sup>37</sup> He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."*