

When We're in the Ditch

Luke 10:25-37

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, (Feb. 13) 2011

Kyle Childress

I don't know about you but sometimes I get so discouraged about our country. And I don't even watch television. It's bad enough to just read the news and follow stories by way of the internet.

Why does so much violence occur in our country, and why all this anger, and what can we do about it? The country has long been split between those who see rights as the fundamental fact of our democracy and those who see responsibility as the fundamental fact. The first group asks what the country can do for you and the second group asks what you can do for your country. The same goes with the church. The American church tends to be split between those who ask the church to meet their needs while others ask how they can serve and give. Most of us in this church, both in our citizenship and in being Christian, tend to fall into the groups who view responsibility and service as the default position of who we are. But even then, we still ask questions about how best to serve. With so many problems what do we do and where do we start? With so much anger and hostility how do we bridge the differences?

With these questions in mind, I've departed from the lectionary this morning and gone back to one of the basic, most essential parables of the Christian life: the Parable of the Good Samaritan. And in reading up on the Good Samaritan I've gone back to one of its great interpreters, Martin Luther King. King preached on

this parable multiple times in his life and brings insights that are useful to this day. And I've relied on Professor Rick Lischer who has documented and studied what King had to say.

Forty-three years ago, on the night before he was assassinated, Martin Luther King Jr. was wrestling with some of the same questions we wrestle with today. He was making a speech in Memphis, Tenn., trying to explain how he had gotten embroiled in a local dispute involving sanitation workers. What did a Nobel Peace Prize winner have to do with striking garbagemen? His closest aides asked the same question and reminded him that he had more important things to do. Memphis was not a strategic city. The sanitation workers were not attractive victims like the children of Birmingham or the voters of Selma. As King spoke that night, a powerful storm moved through Memphis, and his speech was punctuated by claps of thunder, as if to say, "Listen, this is important!"

The historian Taylor Branch tells the back story. Local residents had objected to the sanitation workers' practice of eating lunch and "picnicking" (as they called it) outside the trucks. And so the workers were instructed to eat in the truck – but the cab of a truck will not accommodate a crew of four. One rainy afternoon, two of the workers crawled into the compactor on the back of the truck to eat their sandwiches. Something shorted in the electrical gear, the system engaged, and the two workers were compacted, like garbage. It's no wonder that later, when their colleagues went on strike, many of them wore signs that read, "I am a man."

And so that stormy night King asked the question, "Why Memphis?" He answered it by telling a story, the story of the Good Samaritan. A certain man was making a dangerous journey from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell among thieves

and was robbed, thrown in a ditch and left for dead. In his speech King declares that today in Memphis the man in the ditch is the sanitation worker. He tries to imagine why two religious professionals, the priest and Levite, didn't stop to help. Perhaps, he says, it was because they were late for a meeting of the Jericho Improvement Association, or perhaps it was because they were more concerned with the law that forbids defilement, or perhaps it was because they were just plain afraid. You stop on a road like that, and *you* may well *be* the next victim. You open your home to the wrong people, and they will rob you blind. You stand up for the wrong cause, and your reputation may wind up in the ditch. In his speech, King says even honorable people ask, "What will happen to me if I stop?"

It's a familiar question in our culture, the question of self-interest. Among politicians of both parties, it takes the form of the familiar mantra "the middle class." If we provide benefits to the poor, in terms of health care, better education or other protections, what will be the effect on "the middle class?" Not, "What will happen to the poor if they are not cared for?" – which is God's question throughout the Bible – but, "What will happen to us?" "What will happen to us if we built our town, our neighborhoods, and our budgets with our poorest neighbors in mind? Likewise, the church asks, "If we focus our ministry on the needy, if we try to make a budget worthy of the Old Testament, of Jesus, of loving our neighbor, what will happen to us as an institution?"

The real question, King said in his last speech, is not, "What will happen to me if I *do* stop beside the road?" but, "What will happen to *them* if I *do not*?"

King told this story a lot. I guess all of us preachers do. It's a basic of the Christian life. It is a default parable for all of us who seek to be faithful to Jesus. Sometimes, King told it with another point entirely. In another, more profound

version of the story, the person in the ditch is not the sanitation worker, or the black man, or the poor woman, or the immigrant. America is in the ditch. It is America and the American church, as he often said, that has lost its way on a dangerous road. It has been stripped of its ideals and fundamental commitments and is in desperate need of rescue. It was America, he said, that had wasted so much of its resources on war that it had nothing left for the poor – either white or black. He said it was America that had made absolute the distinctions between white and black, Jew and Gentile, and thereby created an environment of hate and division. And it was the American church, he said in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” that preached personal morality to the skies but on the larger moral issues of the day remained silent.

If America is in the ditch, so who is this Samaritan? Jesus himself gives the answer, but it’s not the one we want. It’s not an answer that will make us comfortable. The Good Samaritan is the foreigner, the immigrant, the outsider, the “other.” The Good Samaritan is the last person you want to see when you’re in need of a helping hand. In his day, King identified the Good Samaritan with the black civil rights movement. By its willingness to suffer and work for change nonviolently, this movement would pull America (and the American church with it) out of the ditch.

In this telling of the story, the question is not, “Are you willing to stop and help?” but, “Are you *ready* to be rescued?” When Jesus first told the story, his hearers would have identified not with the helper but with the helpee, the man in the ditch. It would have been a fellow Jew traveling on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. It’s the ordinary Jewish layperson on an ordinary little trip who winds up in the ditch. Thus Jesus is saying, “It’s somebody like you. Indeed, it *is* you;

you are the man or the woman in the ditch. You are the church in the ditch, the nation in the ditch.” Which raises the question: Are you willing to concede that people *unlike you* may prove redemptive *for you*? Can we admit that our very hope and salvation, the answers we need and the perspectives we’re lacking, come from people who are different from us. Are we open to foreigners, immigrants, refugees, and others? From whom are we willing to accept help? From whom are we willing to learn?

At this point in our history, you could say we’ve tried a lot of salvations. Every time we elect a president, one side or another think they will save us. Or we think the economy will save us, or Wall Street, or cutting taxes. We’ve tried unbridled expressions of rage, we’ve tried conspiratorial theories, we’ve tried rights without responsibilities, we’ve taken refuge in guns – and we are not saved.

To whom shall we turn? Are there any *other* options out there? In his day, King made a controversial proposal. On the basis of Jesus’ life, ministry and death on a cross, he suggested that we try to love one another. It’s hard to imagine how the idea of love could be controversial but for both Jesus and King, love was controversial. *Very* controversial. Because they both took love out of the pulpit and the pew, where it’s the safe, expected word, and injected it into the realm of social conflict and public policy; out where people live on Monday and Tuesday. Jesus didn’t talk about loving your neighbor in the synagogue; he talked about it out on the road. And Jesus was forever speaking about love in all the “wrong” places. So was Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Moses; so was Paul, Augustine, Francis, Dante, Chaucer, Wycliffe, the Anabaptists, Wesley, Dorothy Day, and Martin Luther King. King said we need to love out on highways, in pool halls, city halls, and fire-bombed churches. When he might have been talking about revenge or

strategy, he spoke of reconciliation. Where we speak of love as a private feeling, Jesus and all those who have sought to follow him, speak of love in the flesh of daily life with others – especially with others considered unlike us.

If you think love is only a smoochy feeling that comes with buttered popcorn, Jesus' use of the word will set your teeth on edge. We're tempted to say that love has no place in a violent world like ours, forgetting that the love of God in Jesus crashed into the political process and submitted to its rough justice. Jesus got himself crucified in a world like ours.

So if we find ourselves reaching up for a helping hand or a better idea maybe the "Samaritan option" is something to consider.

The story of the Good Samaritan is really two separate stories. Sometimes we are on the road, and this is a story of encouragement to reach out to those who are lost and hurting, the way King did in Memphis, the way Jesus did throughout his ministry, and the way we do when we are at our best.

But sometimes we're in the ditch, and sooner or later, in one way or another, we're all in the ditch. And when we're in the ditch, this story asks a different question, a more profound question: "Despite our own privileged education, our wealth, or our power – do we understand how God might be using someone or something we never imagined to teach us and make us new?"

When God decided to redeem the human race, he sent someone we were not expecting. He sent a man named Jesus, whose teaching challenged the complacency of our religious categories and whose death was a sheer embarrassment. He was the one of whom Isaiah said, "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was ... a

man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces” (Isaiah 53:2-3 ESV). The human race asks for help. God sends redemption in the form of a crucified Jew. Or a Samaritan. Or a Mexican. Or a Burmese? Or a gay man or a lesbian woman?

Is this a mercy we can accept? Can we receive the grace of God through someone we consider so different?

And yes, we are correct to remember that the road between Jerusalem and Jericho is dangerous. Who knows what will happen on that road? We’re not sure we want to get on that road. It’s a dangerous road.

Just how dangerous? Forty-three years ago, it cost Martin Luther King his life.

How dangerous? You stop on it to help someone, and you may be its next victim.

How dangerous? You stop on it and your church will be vilified. People won’t come.

How dangerous? We might end up in the ditch ourselves.

Just how dangerous? It will cause everything we thought we believed about religion and politics to be changed. Every deep belief will be challenged, and every comforting prejudice will be changed. Because on this road old enemies are transformed into new neighbors; those we don’t know and never wanted to know will become our friends.

This is a dangerous road.

How dangerous? It will even cause us to lift our arms for rescue to a man crucified on a Roman cross.

Amen and amen.