

It was one of those horrible winter days – you know the kind – where you get a foot of snow and then somehow it actually warms up during the night so that the snow turns to freezing rain, resulting in a skating rink wherever you go. School should have probably been cancelled, but it wasn't and that meant even the mile-long drive was sure to be perilous. As I pulled out of the driveway, which was more of a controlled slide into the busy street, I was thankful the road was less busy that day. Just a few blocks down the road, everything seemed to be going as well as it could be, but I knew that the curves in the road were coming. As I entered into the first curve, I felt the car begin to slide – you know, that feeling of being helplessly taken by the whims of the ice. Sure enough, I ended up in the snow bank which was just high enough, and I entered just deep enough that I couldn't get out. The wheels just kept spinning.

First, a couple of cars slowed down. I'm not sure if it was to avoid a similar fate or if they just wanted to see what happened, but no matter how many people slowed down, no matter how many people stared at me through their passenger side windows, none of them stopped. Eventually, my spirits lifted as a car pulled up behind me. A man stepped out and walked to the front of the car. He gave it a little push, clapped his hands together, and said, "Well, you're stuck. Best of luck with that." And as quickly as he came, he was back in his car and driving away.

Now I was in high school, so this was well before I ever became a pastor and so I am not ashamed to admit that there were some words that came out of my mouth that probably shouldn't and there were definitely some thoughts that were not, shall we say, quite so charitable to my neighbor who stopped just to inform me of what I already knew. But as I stewed in my frustration and anger, another car had pulled up. It was woman who was pulling a shovel from the trunk of her car. She didn't say much, but just began shoveling. She shoveled, I used my car scraper, and together we tried to chip away at the ice covered snow, in hopes of getting even just a little traction. Eventually, we were able to get my car out and I made it to school (without further issues) in a much more grateful mood. A little mercy can go a long way. Even as the school showed little sympathy and marked me tardy, I was filled with gratitude by the woman's kindness to me, a stranger turned neighbor.

In our text today, a lawyer wants to test Jesus and justify himself. Now, he's an expert in the law and so he knows that the greatest commandment is to love God with all heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. He doesn't need confirmation from Jesus on that front. But what he really wants to know is if there's a limit to the definition of neighbor. He wants to justify himself and the life that he lives, which means he already has some idea of people whom he does and does not consider to be his neighbor or perhaps even more truthfully, he wants to feel justified in his lack of love for certain people. He knows the law, knows

that he cannot live up to it, and wants to find a way around that by skirting what the commandment requires. He doesn't realize it, but in this parable, he's the one in the ditch. He's the one that has been beaten down by sin and left for dead.

Luke doesn't say what happens next, but I wonder what happened to the lawyer. Was he changed by the parable? That he was being invited to let go of self-righteousness and instead experience wholeness and healing and fullness of life? And that such abundant life comes through mercy and not through our pride and accomplishments? Did he finally understand that what makes someone a neighbor is less about who they are and more about how we are to treat them? Did he realize that the Samaritan in the parable was standing right there and his name is Jesus?

Because here's the thing: I don't think we can fully appreciate or understand the depth and beauty of this parable unless we know what it's like to be the one in the ditch. Too often, we gloss over this parable, concluding that it just means we need to be nice to one another and help people when they need it. But it's so much more than that. Because everyone knows what it's like to be in the ditch. They may not all be the same – some ditches are bigger, some wounds more painful after all. But when you're in the ditch, it doesn't really matter how big or how bad it is, does it? You're still stuck, regardless. Only when we acknowledge that we have been in the ditch before can we begin to see the richness of what Jesus is saying here.

Because Jesus is the one who comes to those who are in the ditch, wasting away as the world passes them by on the other side. Jesus is the one who tends to the wounded when others would only lay blame for the victim's actions. Jesus is the one who carries the broken to give them a place of rest, when others would only say, "Pick yourself up." Jesus is the one who covers the cost and then some, for you and for me and for all. Because it's not about who is worthy to be called a neighbor. It's not about remembering to do good things. It's about a mercy that has been shown to us that we might pass it along to others. It's about empathy and a shared human experience that says, "I've been hurt before, too."

Because we've all been in the ditch. And sometimes it's a result of things we've done and decisions we've made. Other times, it's because life happens. But we've all been the one in the ditch. And there's no justifying ourselves when we're in the ditch. We need a good Samaritan to lift us out. We need Jesus. We need a neighbor. By the mercy of God, we're here. So if you are in a ditch, look around. There's a lot of neighbors to be found here. And if you know someone who is in a ditch, remember that we bear the name of Christ, that we have been in a ditch too, and Jesus came to us with mercy as a neighbor. Remember what a little mercy can do. Go, my friends, and do likewise. Thanks be to God!