

# Sermons at Christ Church

## Love, Re-Imagined

Pentecost V  
The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

Love of my soul, I delight in your presence. Help me feel you nearby and know that your love is everlasting, unconditional, and accepting regardless of past, present, or future. I long to dwell in your loving embrace and to share your love with everyone I meet. Amen.

The lawyer was in a ditch, just as much as the bruised, beaten and half-dead man was also in a ditch. Each of them needed help, albeit a different kind of help. The lawyer's question epitomizes the sentiments that both the Priest and the Levite may have had. The question was and still is, what is my responsibility towards whoever? What is my responsibility towards another; those I know and those I do not know? And in fact, what is my responsibility towards the bruised man left half-dead-the man in the ditch?

One thing you may not know about me is I love to cook, but I did not learn how to cook until I relocated to the US. I started off cooking simple dishes and as time went by, I transitioned into trying my hands on the complicated ones. Whenever I am about to cook some of the complex dishes, I will call my sister and ask for help with ingredients and directions. Needless to say, there were times when even with the best directions, the food didn't taste delicious. I am sure you also may have had that same experience-as good a cook as you may be, not every dish has tasted delicious. Life in a ditch.

There is this assumption that when we get all the mechanics right the food should be delicious. So, how come when we sometimes cook by the book, the food still doesn't taste like we think it should? How come when we believe we have done all the right things, when we believe we have crossed our Ts and dotted our Is, we still have this sense of missing something? As certain as actions may be, certainty does not take away any lingering questions. Life in a ditch.

So, think about the lawyer. He's crossed his T's, dotted his I's-but there appears to be still this burning dissatisfaction-there was more to what he's already done. There's certainly more to life than this. He may have said to himself.

The fact that a lawyer and theologian should ask a layman about the way to eternal life, was unusual. The probable explanation is that the man had been disturbed in conscience by Jesus' preaching. And so he comes to Jesus-it was like, he's cooked the food by the book but the food doesn't taste good. He wants to know why? What more can I do? "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" What must I do? What is the more to life? Life in a ditch.

In response to his question, Jesus asked him about what the law says. He responded, "You shall love the Lord you God with all you heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind: and your neighbor as yourself." To which Jesus replied, "You have answered rightly, do this and you shall live." "And who is my neighbor?" He asked.

In telling the story about the Samaritan, Jesus responds that action is the way to life- and that the lawyer's theological knowledge is of no avail if his life isn't governed by love to God and neighbor- whoever that person may be. While the lawyer's question concerned the object of the love-whom must I treat as a neighbor? Jesus asks about the subject of the love-who acted as a neighbor? The lawyer is only thinking of himself, when he asks; what is the limit of my responsibility? He wanted an indication as to where, within the community, was the limits of the duty of loving were to be drawn. How far does my responsibility extend?

Jesus reminds the lawyer that while a neighbor is may be a fellow countryman, yet the meaning of the term is not limited to that. The example of the despised half-dead was intended to teach him that no human being was beyond the range of his charity. The law of love called him to be ready at any time to give his life for another's need. Jesus says to him: think of the sufferer, put yourself in his place, consider, who needs help? Then you will see that love's demand knows no limit.

Come to think of it, we may all be in a ditch of some sorts. We may be the lawyer whose ditch is one of wondering about the extent to which he can make real his love for neighbor. We may be the

robbers whose ditch is one of taking from the lonely and vulnerable that which belongs to them and beating them till they can no longer survive on their own. We may be the priest or the Levite for whom obedience to the law superseded mercy, and for whom mercy towards another was not the measure of the law. By our nature, we are inherently compassionate, and so when we come in contact with a dire need, we are more prone to respond. But in order not to trigger that compassion, we walk as far away from the scene of need as possible. Our ditch is one of walking on the other side of the road.

We may be the half-dead man lying in the ditch-in serious pain, deep distress and terrible anguish. We have lost everything-we are at the point where we wish that death would come early enough so we don't have to deal with the excruciating pain and hopelessness or that someone would come along, draw ever so close to us, feel our pain, wipe our tears, clean our wounds with oil, put us on his donkey, take us to an inn and assure us that all will be alright, that there's more to life.

You may also be the innkeeper whose ditch is one of taking care of the half-dead man with his own resources with the hope that the Samaritan would return to reimburse him for all his trouble. This is a love in action, one that goes beyond the extra mile. Which is your ditch?

Sometimes my accent betrays me. The moment I open my mouth, one can tell that I am not from the good old USA. There are times when visitors to Christ Church will greet me at the back of the church and ask questions like "where do you come from?"

Well, there were two ways in which people could be identified during Jesus' time: one was by speech and the other was by their clothing. In this story the man was stripped and half dead, which means no one could readily identify who he was by either his dialect or clothing. This man was simply a human being devoid of any human category, ethnicity, background or social stature because all had been stripped away. All that was left was a stricken man soaked in blood lying by the side of the road.

A point that Jesus seeks to make is, value has no existence in itself, rather, it is by being in a loving community that our existence is offered value. Our worth and value is derived from within a community. Richard Niebuhr in his book *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* writes that

“Value is present whenever one existent being with capacities and potentialities confronts another existence that limits or completes or complements it.” Value is present when through acts of conscious love we actualize the essence of another.

The Samaritan probably believed that if he had any value at all, his value was also determined by the stricken man lying by the side of the road, and so with what he had, he proffered value unto himself by offering value, dignity and worth to the stricken man. More importantly, his actions portray someone who believed that man was the measure of the law and so he had no problem extending mercy, he had no problem being compassionate.

Yes, we are all in a ditch. And it is possible that we may not get all things right and sometimes our best efforts may not yield the desired results, but we can never go wrong in showing mercy, we can never go wrong in showing compassion, we can never go wrong in laying down our lives for our neighbor.

Like the lawyer, we all want to live, we want to live abundantly, if so, love has to be a lived experience, kind-heartedness has to be expressed, compassion has to be shared, care has to be shown, mercy must be expressed in action and mending our goal.

The era of Christ isn't a time without the law, but it must be understood as the time of the law's perfect fulfillment in love. The kind of love which calls forth and affirms the reality of the beloved, whoever that beloved may be, the kind of love which brings out our most authentic selves, the kind of love which reaches out from the depth of each human to make another whole and perfect. The kind of love which sees and embraces life, even from a bottomless ditch, that is life, and that is the more to our lives. Amen.

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