

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 17:11-19
October 13th, 2019
The Rev. John Forman

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

For the next several weeks, our Gospel readings will follow Jesus as he travels toward Calvary. This particular encounter, on the way to Jerusalem, foreshadows what is waiting for Jesus there. Luke's stories leading up to the end of the liturgical year show us unwavering Divine love encountering a vacillating variety of human responses.

On Christ the King, the last day of the year, Luke will give us a story from the cross. And there, hanging from the instrument of his death, Jesus will impart God's unwavering love and faith to two people beside him at the edge of death who will respond in quite different ways.

Today, the road to that revelation is passing through a borderland; an area that is not really Samaria and not really Galilee. The historical human Jesus is a Jewish Galilean, though he knows himself to be so much larger than his ethnic identity. He is also the perfect manifestation of the Second Person of the Trinity who has been sent for all people.

And by spreading his teaching through a land that is *no one's*, he makes known a love that is *everyone's*. This is not simply a strip of land separating Galilee and Samaria; it is a spiritual territory on the fringes where people from different clans interact with each other – one of those indistinct marginal regions where God is frequently found.

And from those outskirts, ten people call to Jesus. Nine are Galilean Jews, like Jesus. One is a Samaritan Jew; a descendant of the people who remained in the Northern Kingdom, after the Assyrians deported the ten tribes to Babylon.

The Samaritans were, as far as most Galileans were concerned, the "wrong" Jews – they didn't worship in Jerusalem, but on Mount Gerizim about 30 miles to the north. Samaritan Jews were certain that they were the keepers of true Torah and had little love for the descendants of the Jews who returned

to what was left of the Southern Kingdom from the Babylonian exile. There was an insecure peace threatened by both politics and religion not entirely unlike the one between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.

And here, in this in-between place, Jesus meets ten people gathered together not by religion or ideology or mutual interests, but by a shared skin disease. They probably had psoriasis not leprosy, actually Hanson's disease, which didn't exist in first century Middle East. Even so, they did suffer from raised, red, flaky patches that itched and burned.

For ancient Jews of both kingdoms, the worry was that the problem had gone deeper into the skin. The possibility that the condition had pierced the physical boundary of the body made these ten people ritually unclean and they were separated from others to keep the disease from spreading. The concerns about maintaining safe and secure body boundaries were related to keeping safe and secure social and geographic boundaries.

And yet, here in an unsafe and unsecured geographic area, Jesus meets ten men with compromised body boundaries who have gathered by necessity across social and religious boundaries. Luke's Greek manuscript says that Jesus meets "ten leprous men," not ten lepers. For Luke, the disease is an accidental quality of these men whose humanity is the essential quality of their being.

They recognize Jesus and, speaking with one voice, they call to him by name. In pleading for mercy, for the first time in Luke, people who are not his disciples refer to Jesus as "Master." Jesus and the ten men look past each other's surface appearances to search for each other's essential qualities.

And here the story takes a fascinating turn.

Jesus tells them to go and see the priests. Plural. Now, it's possible that Jesus meant that multiple cases of skin disease would require multiple priests. That assumes, of course, that all ten could go to the Temple in Jerusalem. Except that one of them, the Samaritan, would not be allowed in the Temple. He would have to go to Mt. Gerizim.

"And it happened," Luke tells us, "that, as they went, all ten were made clean." Despite their ethnic and religious distinctions, where they had been bound together in their suffering, now all ten were integrated in the mercy and compassion of Christ. At least for a moment, they were united in their awareness of God's mercy.

The nine following Jesus' command, go on to Jerusalem where they will make an appropriate offering to God in celebration and gratitude for their being cleansed. The Samaritan disobeyed the command and came back to

Jesus. Returning to the unsecured borderland, the spiritual margin, he offers his gratitude directly to Jesus, and assumes that their relationship will now likely end.

While the Samaritan expresses his thanks, Jesus asks some questions: “Were not the ten cleansed? But where are the nine? Were none found returning to give glory to God except only this man of another people?”

I don’t hear Jesus chastising nine joyful, Torah-obeying Jews. I hear him lifting up, maybe even admiring, one man from the wrong clan, as if leading us to see that one clan can be right without needing any other clan to be wrong.

Mercy is larger than that. Truth, so much larger.

Jesus tells the man to rise up and go on his way. They must both leave the sanctity and peace of this marginal place because there is one last boundary still to overcome: Time. The time has not yet come for Samaritans to become followers of Jesus, and so, now freed from his disease, the Samaritan must walk north to his clan. The faith that the Samaritan inhaled and exhaled in the threshold space between communities made him whole.

And Jesus has a purpose yet to fulfill on a hill just outside the walls of the Temple that is holy to his ethnic clan, Galilean Jews. And so, he must continue his walk south to Jericho and from there to Jerusalem. And because Jesus walked on in faith for you and me, not only the boundaries of clan, but the limitations of place and time have been transcended.

We gather right now in that same timeless transitional place with our own shifting mix of backgrounds and experiences. We come together, all integrated as members of the living Body of Christ, bringing all that we are *just as we are*.

We bring bread made from wheat, sweet cream, honey and pure olive oil – fruits of the earth, transformed to represent all that makes us feel joyful and satisfied. We bring wine made from grapes grown at the mouth of the Mediterranean, hand-picked in the Portuguese sun, and transformed to represent all that makes us feel discontent and remorse. We bring offerings of money that represent the work that we have been given to do and the lives we have been given to live as well as the love and the struggles that come with both.

We carry all this to God’s Holy altar in gratitude to God through Christ in the Holy Spirit. God receives these offerings, and you and I, transfigures it all and returns the Body and Blood of Christ and renewed lives to us. By taking the life of Christ into our bodies, we are cleansed and rebound to God so that, as we go on our way, we become God’s reconciliation, mercy and justice.

Reintegrated into the Body of Christ, we wake up to the world we inhabit by noticing grace, seeing goodness and treasuring truth. And we live our gratitude out loud for all the ordinary and extraordinary graces of our life together, radiating the faith of God that makes us whole.

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