

Psalm 111 ~ Luke 17:11-19
Between Samaria and Galilee
18th Sunday after Pentecost
October 9, 2022
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This morning's second scripture is from the gospel called Luke, chapter 17, verses 11-19. This is the New Revised Standard Version, aka the NRSV. Let us listen for the word of God.

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."

Let your Word live within us, faithful God.

Day by day, night by night, in our thinking, our speaking, our doing.

I have to admit this passage has created an itch I can't stop scratching. Maybe I have just looked at it, and thought about it, too long. There are a lot of possible angles here. I wanted to title it, "A Judean, a Galilean, and a Samaritan walk into a bar . . ." followed by the classic punchline, "and the bartender says, 'What is this? Some kind of joke?'" Truth is, the Judeans in Jerusalem, the Galileans, and the Samaritans were all Jews, the people of Israel, bound by the same texts and traditions. Not to say there were not points of disagreement, roughly corresponding to the split between the Northern and Southern kingdoms in 922 BCE. A thousand years! And you thought your family resentments lasted a long time!

There is no region between Samaria and Galilee. They border each other. Here is Samaria, (clap) here is Galilee. A mosquito couldn't live between the two. One of my favorite observations in this regard, I think it was made by the zen philosopher Alan Watts, is that the shore is not where the water and the land are separated. It is just the opposite. It is where they

are connected. Boundaries do not separate us. They are where our shared concerns can share the same space, can share the same cry for help, and can, perhaps, share the response to that cry. It's only in the center, steeped in like-mindedness and far from the effects of our unchallenged assumptions that we can pretend that our purity of intention, our self-validated rightness is a good thing. Nestle up to the border, and you can't avoid the effects your cherished certainty has upon those living just beyond that arbitrary line.

I'd like to ask you to think of being at the center as uncomplicated, matters are clear and simple. Having the border in mind, things get complicated, but the challenges are manageable. Being at the border, however, things can be so perplexing that any action becomes almost impossible for fear of causing more harm than good. Getting back to the problem of "the region between", we can fault the translation. The NRSV should know better. There is almost always a map in the back. The original language is clear. It is better translated "in the midst of." Jesus is inhabiting this liminal space created by the presence of the two peoples. Jesus is the harmony, if you will that can emerge when the differences at the border are bridged by love.

I am becoming convinced the whole obsession this gospel called "Luke" has with Samaritans revolves around using the tag, "Samaritan," as a code word for the Gentiles who would eventually be folded into the Jewish faith, who would then cast aside the time-tested traditions, and who would, as we now know, take over the whole project. Virtually every time Jesus crosses paths with a Samaritan in Luke, he says the equivalent of "Hey! Take a ticket. Wait your turn. These people got here first. I'll call your number when it comes up."

With this gospel's writing — about 90 CE — you could say the Gentiles' number is up. The Jesus movement is now shifting from an exclusively Jewish messianism to a global, almost exclusively non-Jewish if not anti-Jewish messianism. This shift provides a context for why the four gospels, written over the course of 50 to 100 years, become progressively more ignorant, and ignorantly critical, of the ancient traditions that sustained a people, despite their familial differences, for more than a thousand years, and continue to do so today.

The disease we now recognize as leprosy has for most of human history been regarded as an outward sign of God's displeasure, so much so that almost any rare, disfiguring, or incurable disease could share its diagnosis, and its stigma. It was not until the 1870's that the symptoms of the disease we now recognize as leprosy were clearly distinguished from countless other diagnoses. Not long after, Gerhard Hansen identified the bacteria that caused it. It didn't help to learn that the displeasure of God was communicable. It was not until 1960 that the bacilli were found to be reproducible in the footpads of mice so that treatments, be they medical or miracle, could be empirically proven, or disproven, effective.

Effective treatments were soon to follow, and now the only reason leprosy still plagues our species is the same reason poverty does. Cures and preventions are a two-edged sword. They can be provided, and they can be withheld. The blame for suffering no longer falls to fate, or karma, or God. It falls upon us. Ironically, the stigma of leprosy as the outward sign of God's displeasure has shifted from its individual victim to the systems that perpetuate the rest of society's ills.

Did you notice in the reading the words “made clean” and “healed” right next to each other? To be healed can have a range of meanings from physical to psychological to spiritual, but to be made clean in a Galilean or Samaritan context specifically refers to the holiness codes of Leviticus 13-14. If Luke is confused, he is not alone. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible from the mid-third century BCE, complicated things by mistranslating a Hebrew word as “leprosy,” effectively confirming that the social stigma we attach to certain diseases is ordained by God.

The Hebrew word is, forgive my pronunciation, tzara’at. It appears in many places in Hebrew scripture to describe various ritually unclean conditions of the skin, hair, discoloration of linen or wool fabric, or the interior surfaces of homes. Most scholars recognize that Leviticus is not describing an actual medical diagnosis at all. Leviticus 13:10 says, “The priest shall make an examination, and if there is a white swelling in the skin that has turned the hair white and quick raw flesh in the swelling. . . the priest shall pronounce him unclean.” Verse 13 states, “. . . if the tzara’at has covered ALL OF HIS BODY, he shall pronounce him clean.” From a medical perspective, this is crazy. It’s like being completely free of cancer, and being nothing but cancer are the same. It would appear that only when there is hope for a cure, or fear of getting worse that you are unclean. Ritual cleanliness seems to imply a unity or solidarity with the way things are; uncleanliness comes from a resistance to what is.

Bible scholar, Amy Jill Levine says that ritual impurity simply means “you can’t go to the temple and offer sacrifice.” There are several very common bodily functions and unavoidable facts of life that render you ritually impure, among them: menstruation, male nocturnal emissions, giving birth, and touching a dead person. And there are procedures for rendering you ritually pure. Waiting until sunset and taking a bath seems to do the trick. She suggests that ritual impurity is a celebration of the body and its capacity to produce life. The first two, menstruation and nocturnal emissions, mark the possibility of a new life that did not happen, but could have. Child birth, obviously, marks the beginning of a brand new life, and with it a new border to negotiate. And death marks the departure of a life fully present and the beginning of a life now absent, but sustained in loving memory.

These are moments that should drive us to the border and force us to face the fragility and perplexity of our lives. As we often hear in these times, these are not times to make decisions. These are not times to ascend the divine throne and, with singular clarity, offer a sacrifice and demand that God act on behalf of our convictions. These are times to take off your shoes because you are on holy ground. You are in the presence of something that can hurt or heal. Approach the divine fire carefully and humbly, praying that it purifies, but does not consume.

The original language speaks not of ten lepers, but of ten men (gender specific) who have leprosy. Jesus sends them to present themselves to the priests, and in the act of going, they are cleansed. We can question another day whether they are cleansed or healed, and wonder whether the disease has left them entirely or it has completely covered them. The problem for now is that if they had continued to Jerusalem and entered the temple to see the priest, the Samaritan, “This foreigner,” as Jesus referred to him, would have potentially faced the death penalty. In setting out to Jerusalem with the others, his was already the greater act of

faith. Was his response to Jesus' command the act that cleansed the others? As Pastor Jorge reminded us this past July, the faith of the foreigner can save the land that calls them foreign.

Ten were sent and one came back. Notice the language. One was "found to return," like the lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost son just two chapters before. And where the translation says his faith made him well, the original Greek language says it has saved him. What distinguishes the one from the other nine? The truth is most of us, upon being released from a state of suffering, will rush back to the status quo. Most of us will credit our cries for mercy, and our uncomplicated walk back to the simplicity of the center as the source of our salvation. The one who was "found to return" not only thanked Jesus, like we thanked Grandma for that ugly sweater last Christmas. He praised God. You cannot praise the Creator of the cure without praising the Creator of the disease, too.

Here in Marshfield, we don't see leprosy very often. And we don't have a sacrificial temple, or priest to pronounce us clean or unclean. But there are times when our vision is clear, the path is well-lit, and the courage and the strength to walk it almost overwhelms us. And there are times when doubts arise, when the water is muddied, and every path seems as likely to hurt as it is to help. Or there are times that bring life-changing diagnoses, or the loss of a loved one. Or any number of heartbreaks that put us at odds with things as they are. This is our "clean" and "unclean" now, side by side, just like Samaria and Galilee, separated by nothing. When the storms of doubt and fear subside, sometimes we will find the life we thought we'd lost, waiting for us undamaged. But sometimes, return is not possible. We have to venture outside the city walls, leaving behind the safety of simple certainties. Sometimes the storms come and go, destroying our confidence in our ability to manage complexity. Sometimes the storms leave us perplexed at the intersection of roads that all seem to lead nowhere. And sometimes the storms leave us with hearts broken open, able to bridge all borders in love, found to return and praise God for all of it.