

October 13, 2019 Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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GOSPEL

Luke 17:11-19

The holy gospel, according to Saint Luke, the seventeenth chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

¹¹On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹²As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” ¹⁴When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? ¹⁸Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” ¹⁹Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

It is interesting how much we learn to understand ourselves in terms of what we are *not*.

In high school, I was *not* cool...or popular (whatever that really means). And, you know what? I didn’t want to be. I had no school spirit...and I was proud of it. I was 100% *that* punk. I basically aspired to being Daria...and if you know who she is...congratulations...we know who we are. And no one else does. And isn’t that just the point?

That's what inside jokes are for, right? Separating us from them...on the smallest of scales. Just like the borders between nations...those imaginary lines we've drawn across the globe...that separate us on the largest of scales.

And yet, those lines always fail us. At best, they confine us and limit our experience of each other and God...though they might make us feel a bit safer in the meantime. At worst, they separate us from the very relationships that might heal our broken hearts and minds.

Today in Luke we hear a story from outside the lines. There are so many divisions among these people. Jesus is traveling between Galilee and Samaria. The Jews and Samaritans had drawn a firm line between each other, for starters. Theirs was an ethnic difference...but also a religious one. Granted, they had more in common with each other than with many neighboring religions or tribes, but, of course, we do tend to fight most with our closest kin.

But then...that dividing line is overshadowed by the division created by a cruel illness...one that was so feared that people were cut off and cast out if they had it. Leprosy. "Leprosy" was a life-upending word.

I can't imagine what it must have been like in those days to discover the first signs on the skin. Dryness...or red patches...What it would have meant to be told you would never be "clean" enough to come to worship with your family again. For the safety of the community...you could be sent away from everyone...never to be touched again...having to yell from a distance that you were unclean if you ever saw people coming... so they wouldn't come too close. You became acceptable collateral damage for the security of the people. Perhaps, you had done something to deserve it, anyway. Or that's what people must have said. Perhaps, you would have racked your brain for those first weeks trying to think of what horrible thing you could have done...but couldn't see what it might have been. But maybe after months of living as if you were dirty and evil...you eventually just began to believe that you must be.

And it looks like...in the shadow of this common fate...Jews and Samaritans maybe didn't feel so different after all...because this group of ten men with

leprosy became a community even though some were Jews and at least one was a Samaritan. Interesting...when our dividing lines all of a sudden don't seem as important. "Unclean" trumps "Jew vs. Samaritan," it seems.

And it is in this place...between two quarreling peoples...between the clean and unclean...that Jesus travels now. Jesus seems quite at home in the in between.

And in this in-between place Jesus flips the script...as he so often does. Seeing that he is going to Jerusalem, the lepers would have called out in case he was going to the temple. They wouldn't have wanted to make him unclean. But, even though they had to keep their distance, we can tell that they knew who he was...and they desperately hoped he could help them...could love them...could find a way to erase the line between them and hope...between them and the future.

And when he hears them call out...he immediately sends them to the very place they didn't want to contaminate him and prevent him from going. Jesus is always turning things inside out like that. He sends them to an impossible place. Back to community....back to the place of worship...and back to the ones who had sent them away.

And they weren't healed until they were already on their way. What must they have felt to turn around in faith (still sick) and take the first step towards the impossible hope they must have made themselves forget?

And then...what about when they realized what had happened? Well...we know that one of them reacted differently...because he came back to thank Jesus. But, if people have changed as little as I think they have in these few thousand years...I suspect that group of ten didn't do *two* different things...I expect they did ten different things...at least.

Did the other nine make it all the way to the priest? Did some run? Did some stop and cry for a while? Did one just run by every person they saw getting

high fives...relishing the feeling of each palm slapping his? Maybe one just sat and stared at his own skin for a while.

There are so many places we might find ourselves in this story. I don't know if you feel more like the one who turned around...or more like the nine, who Jesus maybe never saw again. Maybe you are someone who was at the temple, never cast out to begin with...always on the inside of the lines. Maybe you are like the priest, a gatekeeper of your community.

I know we tend to make a lot out of the fact that only one turned around and came back to offer thanks and praise. But, I'm not sure how angry Jesus really was at the nine. After all, they may very well have been doing exactly what they were told to do. "Go to the priest," Jesus said. So perhaps they wanted to turn back...but also wanted to do exactly what they were told by the one who had been willing to come close and help them when no one else would or could.

Here's what I think happens to us when we get to this part of the story...I think sometimes we get caught up in who is doing it wrong...who is outside the lines...again...defining ourselves by who we are not. Are we *not* supposed to be like those nine?

I'm less convinced that Jesus is trying to point out who was doing it wrong than that he was trying to point out how we can learn a new way to do it right if only we will pay attention to unexpected teachers. You see, the Samaritan wouldn't have been someone to look up to if you were a Jew. But he did something unexpected...that Samaritan. He stopped in the midst of doing what Jesus commanded to offer gratitude and praise. It's not so much that the others did it wrong as that there was a rich new layer they might discover...if they watched and learned from their Samaritan sibling.

So often, when we look beyond the lines that separate us, we can learn a new way to come close to God that we wouldn't see if we stayed inside our borders and boundaries.

This is what the borderland can teach us. If we follow Jesus out to the edges...to where the lines are drawn, we will find the gateways from God's presence and care for us...to God's love and saving work for the whole world. The borderland between Samaria and Galilee is the place of translation of God's particular love for the people of Israel and God's universal love to redeem all of creation. That is to say...the borderland is the place where God's love shows new colors in how it overflows...where it moves from the intimate to the cosmic.

The borderland is the home of the church. Because we always live in between the truth of God's specific love for each of us...and the work of extending that love beyond us...because it is also for everyone.

The nine did just exactly what they were meant to do. And the Samaritan leper...twice the outcast...did something more. A surprising person, an outsider...showed a new facet of God's goodness...another strand of loving relationship. And if we are looking beyond the lines, we might see it, too. Because it's not about who's doing it wrong...it's about the thousands of shimmering ways that love shines out. There are so many ways to do this right...because all ten were healed...and they each got to go decide what to do next, because the lines that held them captive were gone.

So it is for us. Jesus is breaking down the dividing lines that have held you back. Healing and freedom and love are yours...and all of ours.

The question is: what will we do next?

Amen.

