

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 9, 2022

LUKE 17:11-19

TRADITIONAL

BORDERS ARE PLACES OF DRAMA AND DANGER. THEY'VE BEEN IN THE NEWS A LOT AS PLACES OF DANGER AND CONTROVERSY AS OUR NATION TRIES TO RIDE THE FINE LINE BETWEEN PROTECTION AND PREJUDICE. ON OUR BORDERS, WE FEEL VULNERABLE, EXPOSED, SO WE PUT UP ALL SORTS OF BARRIERS: WALLS, GUARD TOWERS, SURVEILLANCE CAMERAS TO KEEP PEOPLE OUT WHO "NEED" TO BE KEPT OUT.

IN TODAY'S READING, JESUS IS "BETWEEN SAMARIA AND GALILEE." THE ONLY PLACE SCARIER THAN A BORDER IS AN "IN-BETWEEN" PLACE, WHERE BOUNDARIES AND BORDERS AREN'T CLEAR. JESUS IS CROSSING BOUNDARIES AND WANDERING WHERE HE PROBABLY SHOULDN'T GO AND HEALING PEOPLE WITH WHOM HE HAS NO BUSINESS INTERACTING – THE UNCLEAN – THE OUTCAST

THE TEN LEPERS IN THIS STORY FROM THE GOSPEL OF LUKE CALL OUT TO JESUS ACROSS A LINE, THE DISTANCE PRESCRIBED BY THE LAW BECAUSE OF THEIR RITUAL IMPURITY. THEY KNOW THEIR PLACE, AND THEIR PEOPLE: THE OTHER OUTCASTS, UNITED BY THEIR SUFFERING AND THEIR EXCLUSION FROM THE WIDER COMMUNITY. RELIGION AND GOVERNMENT DIDN'T HELP UNLUCKY FOLKS WITH SKIN DISEASES, WHO HAD TO DEPEND ON THE KINDNESS OF PEOPLE PASSING BY, AT A SAFE DISTANCE, OF COURSE: LEPERS, THEN, WERE BEGGARS.

AS JESUS CROSSES THAT BORDER BETWEEN GALILEE AND SAMARIA, IN THAT IN-BETWEEN PLACE, MAYBE HE AND HIS DISCIPLES ARE REMEMBERING THE SAMARITAN TOWN AWHILE BACK THAT REFUSED TO WELCOME HIM (A CLOSED "BORDER"), AND MAYBE THEY WONDER IF THIS VILLAGE WILL REJECT HIM, TOO, ON HIS WAY TO JERUSALEM AND HIS DEATH. AS HE ENTERS THE TOWN, HE ENCOUNTERS THIS LITTLE BAND OF TEN LEPERS. THEY DON'T COME CLOSE, AND HE DOESN'T TOUCH THEM, AS HE OFTEN DOES WHEN HEALING THE SICK. JUST A

WORD, A COMMAND SENDS THEM ON THEIR WAY TO DO WHAT LEPERS ARE SUPPOSED TO DO WHEN THEY'RE HEALED – GO SHOW THEMSELVES TO THE PRIEST AND GET HIM TO STAMP THE CERTIFICATE THAT SAYS THEY'RE SAFE TO RE-ENTER SOCIETY. (THEY HAVE TO MAKE SURE THEIR PAPERWORK IS IN ORDER, AND THEY'RE PROPERLY DOCUMENTED.) BUT WHILE THEY'RE STILL ON THE ROAD, THEY LOOK AT ONE ANOTHER, AND EACH ONE AT HIMSELF, AND THEY SEE THAT THEY'RE HEALED. ONLY ONE OF THEM, A DESPISED SAMARITAN, COMES BACK TO SAY THANK YOU.

THAT'S WHAT IS SO INTERESTING ABOUT THIS STORY. WE HEAR THAT ONE FORMER LEPER TURNS BACK, PRAISING GOD AND THANKING JESUS. HE'S SO FULL OF JOY AND GRATITUDE THAT HE THROWS HIMSELF ON THE GROUND AT JESUS' FEET, AND HE'S TALKING TOO LOUD, AND REALLY MAKING A *SPECTACLE* OF HIMSELF. WE CAN ONLY IMAGINE THE DISCIPLES STANDING AROUND, FEELING UNCOMFORTABLE AT THE DISPLAY. I MEAN, IT'S OKAY TO FEEL GRATEFUL AND ALL, BUT HE DOESN'T NEED TO GET *CARRIED AWAY*, RIGHT?

MEANWHILE, BACK ON THE ROAD TO THE TEMPLE, THE NINE LEPERS ARE OBEDIENTLY DOING WHAT JESUS TOLD THEM TO DO AND WHAT THEY KNOW THE LAW REQUIRES OF THEM. THEY'RE BEING GOOD, OBSERVANT, FAITHFUL JEWS. JESUS WONDERS WHERE THEY ARE, BUT WE KNOW, AND WE ASSUME HE KNOWS, THAT THEY'RE AT THE TEMPLE, GETTING THEIR CERTIFICATES SO THEY CAN GO BACK TO THEIR LIVES. THE THING IS, THEY HAVEN'T DONE ANYTHING WORNG HERE - THEY'RE DOING EXACTLY WHAT THEY ARE SUPPOSED TO DO.

BUT THIS OUTSIDER, THIS SAMARITAN, THIS "THEM," MAY BE SO SEIZED BY GRATITUDE AND JOY THAT HE TURNS BACK TO JESUS, AND THE WORD USED FOR TURN BACK HERE IS MORE THAN JUST A PHYSICAL MOVEMENT - IT HAS MORE TO DO WITH A CHANGE - A TRANSFORMATION THAT TAKES PLACE IN THE PROCESS.

ANYWAY, HE TURNS BACK, BECAUSE AFTER ALL, THE TEMPLE ISN'T A PLACE HE'D BE WELCOME EVEN IF HE IS CURED OF HIS LEPROSY. THERE'S NO CURE FOR BEING A SAMARITAN, A BIG-TIME OUTSIDER. THERE'S NO CERTIFICATION BY THE PRIEST THAT CAN MAKE HIM ACCEPTABLE, AND THERE'S NO EX-SAMARITAN PROGRAM HE CAN ENTER TO CHANGE THAT. HE HAS PLENTY OF TIME TO SAY THANK YOU TO JESUS.

OF COURSE, THIS ISN'T REALLY A STORY ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF THANK-YOU NOTES. WHEN LUKE WROTE HIS GOSPEL, HE SHAPED THE STORIES ABOUT JESUS THAT HE HAD HEARD INTO A NARRATIVE THAT HELPED AN EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY TO UNDERSTAND THE GOSPEL IN THEIR OWN SITUATION, TO HEAR GOD SPEAKING GOOD NEWS TO THEM WHERE THEY WERE, TO SHINE A LIGHT ON THE PROBLEMS THEIR COMMUNITY WAS FACING. ONE OF THE THINGS THEY WRESTLED WITH A LOT WAS THIS QUESTION ABOUT HOW THEY RELATED TO THE JEWISH ROOTS OF THEIR FAITH, AND WHAT THEY SHOULD DO ABOUT ALL THESE GENTILES COMING INTO THEIR CHURCHES. MANY OF THE GOSPEL STORIES ARE TOLD IN THIS LIGHT, AND THEY REFLECT THE EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY, WORKING OUT THE PROBLEM OF WHO THEY WERE, AND WHY ALL THE JEWISH PEOPLE DIDN'T FOLLOW JESUS.

THEY WOULD HAVE HEARD THIS STORY IN THAT LIGHT, AND PRESUMABLY THEY WOULD HAVE THOUGHT, "WOW, IT WAS THE *OUTSIDER* WHO RECOGNIZED JESUS FOR WHO HE WAS. NOT THE NINE FROM HIS OWN PEOPLE."

TODAY, OUR CHURCHES ARE NOT STRUGGLING WITH THE JEWISH-GENTILE QUESTION, ALTHOUGH WE DO CARRY AN AWFUL HISTORY OF TWO THOUSAND YEARS OF PERSECUTING THE JEWS OVER MISINTERPRETATIONS OF THE GOSPEL. STILL, WE LISTEN TO THIS STORY FOR HOW GOD IS STILL SPEAKING TO US, HERE, TODAY, ABOUT THE THINGS THAT WE FACE AND THE STRUGGLES AND QUESTIONS WE HAVE IN OUR JOURNEY OF FAITH.

WHAT'S OUR PLACE IN THE STORY? MAYBE WE'RE THE DISCIPLES, WATCHING ALL THIS AND WANTING TO GET BACK ON THE ROAD AND NOT WANTING THIS SAMARITAN TO HOLD THINGS UP. MAYBE WE'RE IN THE CROWD WATCHING IT ALL HAPPEN AND WONDERING, "WHO IS THIS FELLOW, ANYWAY, WHO CAN CURE LEPERS WITH A WORD?" MAYBE WE'RE ONE OF THE NINE LEPERS, AND HEY, WE'RE TRYING TO BE GOOD LEPERS AND GOOD RELIGIOUS FOLKS WHO FOLLOW THE RULES AND THE PRACTICES OF OUR CHURCH AND OBEY THE RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES AND LAWS...AND THEN WE FEEL SO HAPPY TO BE HEALED THAT WE JUST CAN'T WAIT TO GET TO THE TEMPLE TO BE EXAMINED BY THE PRIEST AND THEN HURRY BACK TO OUR FAMILIES AND FRIENDS AND HAVE A BIG PARTY AND *GET ON WITH OUR LIVES*. EVEN IF THAT MEANS THAT WE, UH, FORGET TO THANK THE ONE WHO MADE IT ALL HAPPEN.

AND MAYBE, JUST MAYBE, AT LEAST ONCE OR TWICE IN OUR LIVES, WE KNOW WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO BE THE TENTH LEPER. THE ONE WHO, RECOGNIZES THE ABSOLUTE NECESSITY IN GOING BACK TO THE MAN WHO MADE IT POSSIBLE FOR HIM TO *JUST BE A HUMAN BEING AGAIN*. A HEALTHY AND WHOLE HUMAN BEING. HE MAY BE AN OUTSIDER HERE; HE MAY BE A “THEM” TO THE CROWD AROUND JESUS, BUT A WORD FROM JESUS, SPOKEN IN COMPASSIONATE CONCERN, GIVES HIM DOUBLE SALVATION – HEALING, RESTORATION AND WHOLENESS. WE CAN ASSUME HE RETURNS TO HIS OWN PEOPLE, ONCE HE FINISHES THE LITTLE DISPLAY THERE AT THE FEET OF JESUS. WE CAN ASSUME HIS LIFE WILL NEVER BE THE SAME.

JESUS DOES THE SAME FOR YOU AND FOR ME. HE STILL TOUCHES AND CLEANSSES US, RELEASING US FROM THE PRISON OF BOUNDARIES THAT IMPRISON US, AND HE DOES IT THROUGH OTHER PEOPLE. THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS WHICH HAVE CHANGED US. THROUGH WORDS OF COMPASSION WHICH HAVE BLESSED US, THROUGH THE PRAYER OF OTHERS WHICH HAVE SUSTAINED US AND SEEN US THROUGH.

I WANT TO TAKE A FEW MINUTES NOW TO HAVE US PLAY THE ROLE OF SAMARITAN BY RETURNING TO ONE PERSON WHO HAS BEEN A HEALING FORCE AND PRESENCE IN YOUR LIFE. MANY OF US WILL AUTOMATICALLY THINK OF OUR PARENTS, BUT FOR THE PURPOSE OF THIS EXERCISE, LET’S GO BEYOND THE PARENTAL INFLUENCE IF YOU CAN TO THAT OF A FRIEND, TEACHER OR MENTOR.

HERE’S WHAT I WOULD LIKE YOU TO DO. 1ST THINK ABOUT THE PERSON, AND THIS PERSON’S ROLE IN BRINGING HEALING AND WHOLENESS INTO YOUR LIFE . EXPRESS YOUR GRATITUDE FOR HIM OR HER NOW. FINALLY, MAKE A PROMISE TO YOURSELF TO CONTACT THIS PERSON THIS WEEK AND TELL THEM WHAT THEY MEAN TO YOU. IN THE NAME OF JESUS WITH GRATITUDE AND PRAISE. AMEN.