

Grace at the Border

18th Sunday after Pentecost/ 13th October 2019

This past week has been challenging on many fronts as we process, understand, and discern the significance of all that has taken place in the news, both here in the United States and especially in Northeast Syria, as we consider the [plight of the Kurds](#) and the suffering and violence and death unleashed by one [telephone call](#). I don't address these events directly in the sermon, but they are never far from my awareness. Therefore, I encourage you to listen to the text and what follows in light of what we are facing as a nation. This is a time when we are being asked: what does it mean for us to claim the name of Jesus Christ? What is being asked of you and me, the Church, in such a time as this?

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

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"On the way," Luke tells us. "On the way"... to where? *To Jerusalem*. The city of God's shalom, the city that praises God and kills God's prophets and sells its soul to foreign powers. Jesus has set his sights on Jerusalem. He knows where he's going. He's focused. Fixed. Attentive to the call placed before him.

He's been on the way there for a long time. Right from the beginning, you could say. But especially after his Transfiguration. Luke tells us that Elijah and Moses appeared to Jesus, shining in glory, "speaking about his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (Lk. 9:32). Soon after, we're told, "he set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Lk. 9:53). From there he preached and taught in Galilee and Samaria. We're told Jesus "went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem" (Lk. 13:22). He knew what waited for him there. "Today, tomorrow, and the next day," Jesus said, "I must be on my way because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem" (Lk. 13:33). Yes, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Lk. 13:34). Knowing the opposition he will face there, forward he goes. As the old hymn sings, "Yet, steadfast he to suffering goes, that he his foes from thence might free."¹

On the way toward Jerusalem, Jesus goes *through* a region *between* Samaria and Galilee. The road toward Jerusalem leads him on a journey through contested space, a space *between*. One journey, the journey to the cross, leads to another; it's a journey within a journey. A journey through a region, through a strange and alien land. It's not Samaria (but it is) and it's not Galilee (but it is), it's something else. A No Man's Land situated between two peoples (cousins really) suspicious of each other, with different customs, traditions, and temples for the same God—Mount Moriah for Jews and Mount Gerizim for Samaritans. The Jews considered Samaritans unclean, blasphemous, untouchable people. This is a space fraught with tension and hurt, situated between “clean” and “unclean,” between the familiar and the scary unknown, between safety and threat, and therefore unsettling, disturbing.

It's what we could call a *liminal* space, from the Latin word “limen,” meaning “threshold.” A liminal space is a space in between, not either-or, but both-and. Train stations and airports are liminal spaces. A doorway, almost any threshold, is a place of transition from one room or place to another. Our ancestors, in many religious traditions, considered thresholds, doorways sacred, holy. The cultural anthropologist Victor Turner (1920-1983) has shown that a liminal space, betwixt and between, not “here” and not “there,” is the place where religious transformations and moments of enlightenment often occur, it's the place where insight, psychological wisdom, healing, and even wholeness begin to emerge.² “Liminal” and “liminality” are two of my favorite words, and I often find myself enchanted by liminal spaces and moments and experiences. I know them to be sacred, holy, transforming. And we find countless examples of the transforming potential of the liminal all over the Bible. Such as here in this region between Samaria and Galilee.

And so Jesus' journey to the cross takes him straight down the middle between these two regions, *through* a region, a godforsaken place where people discarded by both Samaria and Galilee live together and suffer together, and cry out for mercy. The way to the cross leads Jesus here, a place betwixt and between. The place of human suffering. It's where he chooses to go.

Out of the shadows ten men with leprosy appear. The Greek doesn't say “lepers,” although that's how the NRSV translates it. Luke respects the humanity by saying “ten leprous men.” The disease or condition doesn't define who they are; they are sick, hurting, in pain, isolated, ostracized, but still sons of Adam. And it's unlikely that leprosy (Hansen's disease) existed in first-century Palestine. Leprosy refers to a variety of skin diseases considered contagious and “unclean.” If you had this condition life was hell. You lived in seclusion. If you ventured out you had to keep your distance from everyone else. You had to wear torn clothes, and keep your hair disheveled, to stand out. And, according to Leviticus, if you did go out you had to warn people that you were approaching, “Unclean! Unclean!” (Lev. 13:35).

But they threw caution and precaution and convention aside the day love came to town. They approached him. They kept their distance, Luke says, but they knew who he was, they knew him by name and cried. “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” Jesus didn't ignore them. He heard them. More importantly, he *saw* them. In fact, we're told “when he saw them,” without expecting anything more from them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests” (Lk. 17:14). The priests were the gatekeepers. They had to verify the healing. If you were free from symptoms for seven days, only then were you declared “clean” and allowed back into the

community, only then were you allowed back to your family, to work, to worship. And so they went, immediately, following his command, trusting his word with no evidence that mercy had been granted to them. I love how Luke phrases this, “And *as they went*, they were made clean.” On the way to the priests, on the way, stepping out in faith, they were made clean, they were healed.

Ten cried out for mercy. Ten were “cleansed.” Ten of them went to the priest, but they didn’t all go to the same priests. They couldn’t have. Because one, as we learned, was a Samaritan, a “foreigner” Jesus said. The Greek describes him as one “otherly-born.” He had to go to a *Samaritan* priest. This means we could consider the Samaritan a “double other.” From the perspective of the Jews he was already deemed “other,” different, and then from the perspective of both Jew and Samaritan was deemed “other” because of his skin disease. It’s only this Samaritan, this twice alienated soul, who becomes conscious, on the way to the priest, that he had been healed and then turns back, deliberately choosing to delay his appointment with the priest, deliberately disobeying Jesus’s command. He turns back, praising and shouting, for all to hear him, to offer thanks to God. Nothing holds him back. Can you imagine him running back with joy, with energy? He just doesn’t offer up a silent prayer of thanks to God, he moves. He carries himself back, and then *throws himself* with gratitude toward Jesus. The Samaritan throws himself—throws his *body*—at Jesus’ dusty, dirty, smelly feet. These dusty, dirty, smelly feet that are on the way to Jerusalem—for him.

Ten were healed, and only one returned to give praise to God. Much has been made in countless sermons on this text over the centuries on the virtue of giving thanks. Ten were healed, one returned thanks. Ten were healed, but did you notice only one was decreed “well”? “Get up and go on your way,” Jesus said to the Samaritan, “your faith has made you well” (Lk 17:19).

Jesus’ pronouncement of wellness—*sesoken* (σέσωκέν)—is, perhaps, what matters most in this text. From the Greek verb *sozo* (σώζω)—to save—it signifies the fact that the Samaritan has a new state of being. We could also translate it this way: “...your faith has made you whole.”³ In other words, the Samaritan’s faith or trust in Jesus—in what *God* is doing through Jesus, the Samaritan’s sharing in the emerging reign of God, a participant in this movement that is carrying Jesus to Jerusalem, this beneficiary of God’s good news for the low and lonely, the judged and rejected, all this—has not only healed him, but made him whole. He gets to experience a wholeness that wasn’t there before, whatever about his life that wasn’t “whole” before.

For Jesus to use *sozo* here tells us this story is not merely about the healing of a skin disease. Because, you see, his healing paves the way for him to be well. Because he is healed, by God’s grace, he can now return to his home, his family, his community, his work, his village, his synagogue...his life—and be well, *whole*. He’s saved for wholeness. Because wholeness is what God desires for each and all of us. That’s the good news of God! For God was at work in Jesus and on the cross and in the grave to remove *everything*, every impediment, every “sin” that deprives us of life, and relationship, everything that denies us wholeness.⁴

And through God's Spirit at work in the world, at work in the church, at work in you and me, we, too, are called to get up and be about the way of Christ. Yes, we are to be grateful. Sure, we can try to live like the Samaritan. But what if we are called to identify less with the Samaritan, and more with Jesus? What then? What if we are called to go in his name to the border, to the "borderline" places in our lives, to people living on the edge and in-between, to care for those who are "out of place," who have been "othered," and offer them grace and mercy, the wholeness of God? What if it's our task as the church to make a profound difference—in ten or two or twenty, two hundred—or how about just *one* person? Just one person who knows, by God's grace, what it's like to be made whole by the Living God?

On the way toward Jerusalem, Jesus went *through* a region *between* Samaria and Galilee.

So where is that region, that in-between place for you?
Where are those places we're reluctant to go, but need to go?
Where's the "border" for you?
Who lives there, suffering there?
Who is the "other" who needs to know their divine worth?

To follow Jesus means following the way that leads toward human suffering, not away from it. Like Jesus, we are summoned to see the ones who are suffering, *really see* the ones calling out for mercy, and then move toward them. We need to cross the chasm that separates us from them and, through the mercy of God, extend mercy, healing, wholeness.

We're not called to play it safe, but to step out, reach out. The church cannot afford to play it safe in this age—there is too much at stake.

And so I ask the Session, the Trustees, the Deacons, the Christian Education Committee, Mission, Peace and Justice, Outreach, all our committees and boards, the choir, all of us: where is the borderland—the no man's land, the liminal space, the place on the edge or in-between—where we are being called to embody God's mercy, and grace, and wellness? Where do we need to be ministers of wholeness?

There are plenty examples I could give, but I will not. I know what I think. *You* need to wrestle with these questions. *We* need to wrestle with these questions together.

What do you think? Actually, don't think too much about it. Pray about it. Then look. *Really* look. With the eyes of your heart, *look*. Then see and feel and listen to your gut. What is your *gut* saying? Where is the Spirit leading you, calling you, nudging you, pushing you—kicking you?

What has the mercy of God—which has caused *you* to shout with joy and thrown you to the feet of Jesus with thanks, and down at his feet—what has mercy, and thanksgiving, taught you? What is God's mercy calling you toward? What is God's mercy calling you to do?

So get up and let us go on *his* way—the way that leads to life and wholeness.

¹ Samuel Crossman (1624-1683)'s poem "My song is love unknown," set to hymn tune LOVE UNKNOWN, written by John Ireland (1879-1962).

² Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Aldine Transactions, 1995).

³ D. Mark Davis's analysis of the Greek text, [here](http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/): <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/>.

⁴ Davis helpfully [defines](#) "sin" as "anything that is destructive of the life and community that gives us wholeness."