

**A sermon preached on October 13<sup>th</sup>, based upon Luke 17:11-19 entitled, "To Truly Appreciate Grace, You have to Remember what Life Feels Like As an Outsider."**

There are two stories told by the great story teller we call "Luke" that came to mind this week as I pondered the story we just heard of the ten lepers who were healed by Jesus.

The first comes ten chapters earlier in the Gospel of Luke. It involves a dinner party hosted by a Pharisee named Simon. Simon invited Jesus to his dinner party and as a general rule Jesus was open to all such invitations. But it didn't seem to be a dinner party with much joy. The purpose of his invitation seems to have been so that Simon and his Pharisee friends could have the opportunity to evaluate Jesus up close and pass judgment of him.

Somehow a woman of this particular city who was referred to as a "sinner" which in this context means a woman with a bad reputation -- someone who had flagrantly broken the laws of the Torah -- finds out that Jesus is present at the party and does an outrageous thing -- she crashes the party -- this party for "righteous" men at which she was distinctly unwelcome. She did this because somehow in the deep darkness of her life the woman intuited that in Jesus she could find grace to heal her wounded soul. A deep love welled up within her moving the woman to tears. She fell at his feet and began to bath Jesus' feet with her tears, and anoint them with ointment. She dried his feet with her long, flowing hair, and Simon and his Pharisee friends were horrified, quickly concluding that the fact that Jesus would allow this sinful woman to come in contact with him proved he wasn't sent by God.

Jesus senses their judgments and directs a question to Simon. "If a certain creditor was to forgive one man 500 denarii and another 50 denarii, which of the two would love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one who was forgiven more."

Jesus proceeds to point out the half-hearted welcome he had received when he arrived at Simon's party. With the standard hospitality of the day a guest would be welcomed by a kiss, water with which to bathe his feet. The guest would be anointed with oil. None of this had taken place when he arrived, Jesus pointed out. In contrast, Jesus pointed out the outpouring of love he had received from the woman. "The one to whom little is forgiven, loves little," says Jesus in conclusion. And then he turned to the woman and said, "Go in peace, your faith has saved you."

The second story doesn't occur in the Gospel, but rather in Luke's sequel, the Book of Acts, and it tells how on the Day of Pentecost Jesus' first disciples were all gathered in

one place in Jerusalem when suddenly there was a powerful outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon them. Luke turns to metaphors to describe what they were experiencing, saying it was like a mighty wind, and that "tongues of fire" were descending upon each of them.

Led by the power of the Spirit, these humble Galilean followers of Jesus began speaking in various languages. The sounds coming forth from the gathered followers drew a great crowd, many of whom would have been pilgrims from all around the world. This diverse crowd was amazed to hear the great deeds of God proclaimed in the native tongue. How was this astonishing thing happening? But there were some present who scoffed at what was happening. "These men carrying on this way are simply drunk (at nine o'clock in the morning)."

If we ask how these scoffers could miss the miracle -- the extraordinary grace that was being poured out by God to overcome the divisions expressed in languages, there can be but one explanation: The ones who scoffed were the "insiders", the ones who lived year round in Jerusalem and expected to hear their own language spoken. It's unfortunate for them, really.

With these two stories in mind, we turn now to the story we just heard Fred read. Jesus is headed to Jerusalem from the north country of Galilee where he is from and his ministry to this point has taken place. He was on his way there to lay down his life for not some but rather all people. The land of Samaria was positioned between the Jewish regions of Galilee and Judea in the south where Jerusalem resided.

You may remember that there was in those days great animosity between Jews and Samaritans. Samaritans were considered enemies and in another story in Luke's Gospel Jesus shocked his listeners by making a Samaritan the hero of a story that demonstrated what love for the neighbor looked like. In those days it was not uncommon for Jews making the trip to Jerusalem to go out of their way to avoid coming in contact with the hated Samaritans. But Jesus, seeking to reconcile this broken and divided world heads straight through Samaria.

And it was there in the border land between Galilee and Samaria that Jesus encounters ten lepers.

In those days, and throughout much of history a diagnosis of leprosy was about as devastating as any news could be. Not only was leprosy physically painful, making a person vulnerable to infection and threatening their lives, in certain ways the toll the disease took was even worse in the other dimensions of a person's life because of the contagious nature of the disease. The book of Leviticus gave explicit commands

regarding what was to occur when a person came down with leprosy. The afflicted person was compelled to leave their homes and their families and their villages and go to live outside the city limits, where there they would scratch out an existence through begging. They were not allowed to travel on the roads, but rather beside the roads in order to keep their distances from people who weren't afflicted with the disease. They were considered ritually "unclean" and with this came the implication that their affliction was in some sense God's punishment for their sins.

So consider how all-encompassing the impact of the disease. Beyond the physical torment, it severed the family and community relationships that are so central to life, completely isolating a person. The roles or jobs a person had previously performed that shaped their identity, that too was lost. A leper was invisible – a person without an identity.

So someone with leprosy was the consummate outsider, brought to the absolute deepest depths of life, and so from this vantage point somehow they intuited that in Jesus there was mercy and healing to be found, and they cried out, "Master, have mercy on us."

In response, Jesus commands them to go and show themselves to the priests in the Temple in Jerusalem. It is a striking detail. The Book of Leviticus provided instructions for what should happen in the case that a person was healed of leprosy, and that was that they were to present themselves to the priests who would inspect their bodies to assure that they had been cleansed of their disease, and if that were the case provide them with a certificate validating that they were free to return to their homes.

We sometimes hear this story and think that only one leper demonstrated faith, but in fact all ten did. They set off on the long journey to the Temple in Jerusalem before the healing had happened in obedience to Jesus' command, trusting that if they did healing would take place. Last week I talked about how faith as Jesus spoke of was connected to three words: trust, perseverance, and obedience and the ten afflicted souls all demonstrated this in their willingness to set off on the difficult journey.

As they set out, they all discovered that their skin was healed. One of the ten turns back and praising God returns to Jesus and gives thanks, and this one it turns out was a Samaritan. In response, Jesus seems disappointed that the other nine did not return, even though they were doing what he had commanded them to do.

What exactly is happening here is not altogether clear, but this much is clear: it wouldn't have made much sense for the Samaritan to go to the Jewish priests to show himself, because even without leprosy, the Jewish priests would have considered him unclean, because he was despised Samaritan.

So there was for this Samaritan leper an extra dimension to his status as an "outsider." Perhaps in a similar way to the woman at the Pharisee's dinner party, this man appreciated the grace he had received on an even deeper level than the others.

And perhaps freed from the structures of his religion, he was free to back to the person in whom he had encountered the grace of God, and in astonishment and awe give thanks to Jesus.

These passages suggest that is important to reflect on our experiences of being insiders and outsiders. The Pharisees at the dinner party, the residents of Jerusalem at Pentecost – in their status as insiders they missed the presence of divine grace.

When have you been an outsider, and when have you been the insider? Hopefully here at our church you have some sense of belonging, of being an insider. But it is important to remember the places where you felt excluded.

I shared in Fred's group how I grew up in a family in which my parents were divorced when I was eleven, and how I don't think my parents ever really loved one another. Although I was blessed by a particularly warm relationship with a mother who easily understood my nature, the impact of my family history is that I grew up without being a part of a family that held a primary loyalty to one another – without the sense of belonging that a functional family provides, and as a result I often would find myself descending into a dark place in the midst of groups of people I did not know well, feeling the acute pain of an outsider.

In college I become acquainted with Jesus and his grace, and I found there a sense of belonging I did not know at what was called my "home." When Christmas and summer vacation would come around, where other students looked happily to returning "home", I felt as though I was losing my home.

For me, church has been the place where I have discovered the gift of belonging, of feeling the warm embrace of being inside a community that embraces me. But my memory of what it feels like to be the outsider, and the wound that continues to live inside me, is a source I draw upon allowing me to empathize with others who find themselves on the edges of our church as outsiders. It is out of this experience that our church slogan arose: "There's always room in the circle."

In reflecting on this morning's story, I realized that it expresses a couple of things that are connected with why I believe in the God revealed in Jesus.

The first thing is this: In the eyes of the world there are people who matter and people who either matter less or don't matter at all, and when I am "anxious and troubled about many things" – another expression found in Luke's Gospel from another story -- I tend to get caught up in that way of seeing things human beings.

But in my more reflective moments, I intuit a truth that goes beyond logic, and that is that every single person is of sacred worth.

Now, if there is no loving creator to endow that sacred worth on every person, then on a certain level we have no basis by which to criticize the Hitlers of this world who believe it is appropriate to exterminate certain persons. Without a God, on a certain level it's essentially their opinion against mine.

In this story we see a God revealed in Jesus who sees these ten people afflicted with leprosy -- people whom the world considers unworthy, invisible nobodies – as people endowed with a sacred worth.

Second, there are moments that come to us in life that awaken within us a sense of awe, of praise, of thanksgiving. The miracle of what happened on the day of Pentecost was one. What occurred to these ten people afflicted with leprosy when suddenly their disease was healed was another. Such a moment can occur when a baby is born, or in more mundane settings – when, say we are suddenly caught up in the beauty of the earth on a clear Autumn day like this one. In some sense these moments are related to the fact that our journey through life doesn't include nothing but blessedness. It is because of the contrasts in which life is invariably experienced that the moments of grace stand out as they do.

But if we are open to such experiences of awe and wonder, there is within us this innate need to give thanks. And without a God of love who is the source of all good gifts, to whom can this thanksgiving be offered?