

***A sermon preached on March 15, 2020 – the Sunday we turned to worship online because of the coronavirus. Our text is Luke 17:6-7, 11-17. A live version of this can be found at our website and at the Facebook page of the Parsippany United Methodist Church.***

When I began looking for a scripture passage to preach on that arose from a time of crisis, I realized I had no shortage of choices. A great deal of the Bible arises out of times of crisis.

I landed on the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke's Gospel. Jesus and his disciples are making their way towards Jerusalem where in short order all hell with break loose. Jesus has told them that he personally will be killed, and the disciples are filled with terror. There's another level of crisis, however and that is the fact that Luke wrote his Gospel at a time with the Roman siege of Jerusalem was taking place, leading to hundreds of thousands of people dying by violence and famine. So the following cry expresses the fear that threatens to overwhelm both the original disciples as well as those attempting to follow him nearly forty years later:

***The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you."***

Jesus responds to their terror with a striking image: mustard seed faith. The thing about a tiny mustard seed is that it can live buried in the earth sometimes for years in a dormant state, waiting for the right moment when the rains finally arrive that would lead the seed to cease to be merely a seed – to crack open to sprout with new life, fulfilling its purpose for existence.

I hear Jesus speaking words of reassurance here. You may not realize it, but the faith you need is buried deep inside you, waiting for the right opportunity to break open and sprout. Let me suggest to you that now is such a moment.

I once heard that the Chinese character for the word "crisis" was made by putting the characters for two other words together -- "danger" and "opportunity" -- which is to say, that in a crisis there is both danger and opportunity.

In the crisis we are in the danger is very real. Many, many people will get sick before this is through. The majority – perhaps 80% only – we experiences symptoms not much worse than a cold. But others – many others – will get very sick. Many people are likely to die before this is through.

The danger to our bodies is pretty evident, but what might be less evident is the danger to our souls. Our "soul" is that deepest, truest part of who we each are – the part made in the image and likeness of a merciful God – that profound capacity for love that is inside each of us. The danger here, as Jesus says elsewhere is that we might lose our souls in the midst of trying to assure our physical survival.

During a time in our nation's history that was probably the greatest crisis our country ever faced – the civil war – Abraham Lincoln spoke of the need to call forth "our better angels." Our

capacity to love – to care for one another – to be clear about what really matters and what doesn't. Let the better angels arise -- not the demons of self-centeredness that feed on panic.

So let's focus on the opportunities hidden in the present crisis – that together we may actually discover a profound capacity within us to trust God and one another – that we may follow the winds of the Spirit to love in new ways.

As Luke's 17<sup>th</sup> chapter continues, we are reminded where Jesus is headed and the path he chooses to get there:

***Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee.***

Ah, the border between Samaria and Galilee. That's where you always find Jesus – on the borderline – in that space where the choice is presented to us to whether we will call forth our better angels or our demons.

You probably know of the ancient hostility that existed in those days between the Jews of Galilee (*which is what Jesus was*) and the Samaritans of Samaria. For generations the Jews and the Samaritans had taught their children from a very young age to hate and demonize one another, to see each other as less than fully human.

Human nature hasn't changed from those days. The wall that separated the Jews and the Samaritans continues to separate us in our inclination to divide ourselves into warring tribes. We all have our "Samaritans" – those we cut ourselves off from and see as less than fully human.

Who are your "Samaritans?"

*As Jesus was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"*

Perhaps you can see why this particular Bible story came to mind. It involves a dangerous contagious disease, and it includes this strange concept we've been hearing so much about lately, "social distancing."

In those days, when a person first began to show the signs of the disease of leprosy, they were compelled by the authorities -- in those days the priests -- to leave their homes, leave their families, to go and live outside of the borders of their villages where they couldn't infect others. When non-infected people happened to draw near, they were required to warn them to keep a safe distance. Out on the borderlines, they survived by begging, always from a distance.

But here is a part of the story that may not be obvious – the part that contained “opportunity.” Thrown together by their common plight, because they are on the borderline between Galilee and Samaria a peculiar little community of ten lepers arises that includes both Jews and Samaritans.

For the first time in their lives, these Samaritan and Jewish lepers got to really know people they had always been taught to dehumanize in their minds, and as they did, they realized they had far more in common than that which separated them: “This Jew – this Samaritan -- is homesick, misses his family, just like me. He misses the little routines of daily life that he once took for granted – just like me. He is frightened regarding whether he’ll ever get to live with his family again, whether this disease we soon take his life, whether there will be enough food to survive, just – like -- me.”

They saw what they hadn’t seen before: the tribal “truths” they had been taught were actually lies. They saw the truth, “We are in this together. We are each other’s family now.”

Seen or unseen, Jesus is always present in the borderlines of life.

*When Jesus saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were cleansed.*

In obedience to Jesus the ten go to the authorities – the priests in those days – the medical authorities of our day – who can validate that they no longer need to be quarantined. I would suggest to you that inside each of these ten, a mustard seed of faith broke open because they trusted Jesus and obeyed his command to go, even though at first they had no assurance. It was only as they went that -- to their astonishment -- they discovered they were healed. .

***One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.”***

It isn’t easy to make sense of this part of the story. All of the ten obey Jesus’ orders to go to the priests, but only one -- a Samaritan -- defies Jesus’ orders and instead turns back to give thanks to the Jewish healer who has restored him to health. Jesus seems disappointed the other nine didn’t do the same.

Perhaps the meaning of this is that the focus of the nine quickly become returning to their old lives, and in doing so to leave behind the truth they had glimpsed out there on the borderline. Perhaps in returning to the Jewish rabbi to give thanks, the Samaritan expresses his commitment

to not forget the truth he has come to know. He dwells deeply in gratitude – a gratitude awakened from having endured this crisis. In a deeper sense, his faith has made him whole.

The last time in my life time we had a crisis as a nation of this magnitude was 9/11. If you are old enough, you will remember the days immediately following the terrorist attacks – if we weren't first responders at the towers we all slowed our lives down -- we stopped rushing about chasing the things we suddenly realized didn't really matter. We saw what truly does matter in life. We were gentle and kind with one another, including complete strangers. Love moved among us like the wind in powerful ways.

As time passed, however we gradually returned to our old ways of living in this world. Like the nine, we slowly got back to business as usual.

And here we are again. Will our better angels or our demons prevail?

It remains to be seen.

This crisis is different, of course. There is a balance we must find. Though it may seem hard to recognize it as such, but at the present moment choosing to social isolate is an act of love. If we are among those who – should we be infected – are not at great risk to life experiencing threatening illness, we still have the capacity to transmit the virus to others and in doing so increase the likelihood that the most vulnerable among us will be seriously harmed.

And yet even as we practice “social isolation”, we need to find ways to stay connected and offer support, especially to those less fortunate than ourselves. As a faith community, we need to be connected in order to experience the grace that allows our better angels arise – to encourage the buried seeds of our mustard seed faith to go ahead and break open in a deeper sense of trust.

And in relation to our larger communities, we need to remember that we truly are all in this together: Democrats and Republicans, people of different races, ethnicities and religions. Everybody.

If we are following Jesus, we follow him into the borderlines of this world to bring down the walls that separate us and witness to the width and breadth and depth of the love that holds us all together.