



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday After Trinity St. Luke 17:11-19 & Galatians 5:16-24

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Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, St. Luke tells us. Making his way there from Galilee for the last time. And along the way, he passed through the borderlands between Samaria and Galilee. Galilee was up in the north. And as much as everyone talked about going “up to Jerusalem”, that was because it was up in the mountains. Jerusalem, in the territory of Judah, was way down south. In between was Samaria. No self-respecting Jew cut through Samaria. They went around. Because the Samaritans were filthy. As I said last week, they were the Jews who went wrong to begin with way back when they broke from Judah and established their own illicit temple at Shechem, on Mount Gerizim. But they’d gone from bad to worse when they intermarried with the pagans then compromised *torah* with various pagan influences. The Jews despised the Samaritans (and the Samaritans didn’t feel very kindly towards the Jews in return). So Jesus and his disciples skirted through the borderlands. Still, being so close, there was no telling who you might meet along the way.

But, says Luke, as Jesus was going into one particular village he was met by ten men far worse than any Samaritan. Ten men with leprosy. They knew the rules. They stayed some distance away, but they approached as close as they dared. They were unclean and they were outcasts. Leprosy in the Bible could be any one of a multitude of contagious skin diseases, and according to the *torah*, if a priest certified you had such a disease, you were cut off from everyone: from your family, from your friends, from the community. They had to go off and live in their own little colonies

on the fringes of civilisation. If they were lucky, their friends and family might bring them food and leave it at a distance. But maybe worse still, they were cut off from the *covenant* community—from the people of God. They were unwelcome in the synagogues. They were cut off from the temple because they were unclean. That meant they were excluded from the Lord’s presence and from the sacrificial system that provided forgiveness of sins. And they were cut off from the Passover. You had to be ritually pure to participate in that too. To put it in our terms: they were cut off from the church and the sacraments.

And there wasn’t much sympathy for them. Do you remember the blind man who Jesus and the disciples encountered in John 9? The first question from the disciples was, “Who sinned? This man or his parents?” That’s the lens through which people looked at lepers and cripples and the destitute. They wouldn’t be in such a state if they hadn’t done something to offend the Lord. Leprosy was sort of a sign that God’s judgement had fallen on you early. I hope that gives you a sense of just how hopeless these men would have felt.

But for the first time in a long time they had a glimmer of hope. They heard that Jesus was passing through town. The good news that Jesus was preaching, the stories about him healing the sick and even raising the dead, they’d spread far and wide—even to the leper colonies. Wherever he went, Jesus was making sad things come untrue and wiping away tears, and so they went to him. Maybe he’d make their sad things come untrue, too. And so they stood at a distance. Again, they weren’t allowed to get close. I’d bet they’d probably been taught lessons in the past about getting too close to healthy people, to good people—who had cursed at them and thrown rocks at them. Knowing how Jesus’ disciples could be sometimes, it’s not hard to imagine some of the having already picked up some nice, heavy, pointy rocks to throw—just in case. So they stand at a distance and they call out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

That got Jesus’ attention. That title “Master”, that they used. That’s usually

what his disciples called him, but he didn’t hear it very often from other people. People called him “rabbi” or “teacher”, but this “Master”—it had the sense of rabbi or teacher, too, but it was something you called someone whom you knew also had authority. Again, they’d heard about the things Jesus had done. They knew that somehow and in some way he had authority over sickness, disease—even over death itself. And so they call out to him in faith: “Master! Have mercy on us! Show us compassion! Wipe away our tears. Make our sad things come untrue! We know you can, because you have mastery over sickness and death.”

And in response, Jesus said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” He doesn’t heal them. Instead he sends them to the priest. But it makes sense if you understand that it was the priests who were trained according to the *torah* to evaluate these diseases and to determine whether someone was healed or not. Eventually, they’d have to go to see the local priest one way or another if they wanted to be admitted back into the community. So Jesus sends them to do the very thing they would have to do if they were healed.

The way Luke tells the story draws a pretty unmistakable parallel with the story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5. Naaman was the commander of the Syrian army back in the days of the Prophet Elisha. Naaman was also a leper. But he had a young Jewish slave girl in his house who told of this prophet. Naaman eventually went to see Elisha, but Elisha refused to see him. Instead, the prophet sent Naaman a messenger, who told the commander to go and wash in the Jordan River. Naaman was furious. He was mad that Elisha wouldn’t see him and he was mad at being told to wash in a dirty Jewish river, as if it were somehow better than the rivers of his own country. But eventually, in faith, Naaman went and washed in the Jordan. He went down into the waters and rose up healed of his leprosy.

In the same way Elisha told Naaman to take a step of faith, Jesus tells these men to do the same. Go to the local priest. It seemed like a waste of time. He’d just have them hold out their hands and feet,

their arms and legs, have them uncover their heads—and there would be all the sores and the priest would tell them they were still unclean. But because of what they'd heard about Jesus, they went on off in faith to see the priest anyway.

I think Luke—a gentile—frames the story this way, drawing the parallel with Naaman, for a reason. Earlier in Luke, Jesus had rebuked the people of Nazareth by reminding them of Naaman and Elisha. He said to them, “There were many lepers in Israel in the time of the Prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian” (Luke 4:27). In other words, because of their lack of faith, Israel was missing out on the Lord's deliverance. Instead, it was the outsiders who were hearing and receiving the good news: the tax collectors and sinners, Samaritans and gentiles—even lepers. It's as if Jesus knew how each of these men would respond.

They came to Jesus in faith and in faith all ten of them go off to see the priest. And Luke writes that “as they went, they were healed.” What they asked for in faith, Jesus gives. Think of what that meant. Once the priest had given them the all clear, they could return to their families and to their community. They could go to the synagogue. Once again, they could know God's forgiveness of sin at the temple. They could eat the Passover and know they belonged to the Lord. And yet, Luke writes, one of them—only one—seeing that he'd been healed, turned back and gave glory to God at the top of his voice. He fell on his face at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And, Luke adds, he was a Samaritan.

Jesus' miracle highlights who he is and what he's come to do. Jesus' miracle highlights the faithfulness of the God of Israel to his promises. The healing of the ten lepers, like all of Jesus' miracles, proclaims the coming of the promised and long-awaited kingdom. In Jesus the Messiah, the God of Israel is doing what he promised and beginning to set the world to rights. This is astounding. And yet these nine men seem to take it for granted. We're not privy to their motives and neither was Luke. Maybe

they were just so overwhelmed by excitement and joy that they forgot. Maybe they were afraid to go back lest the miracle be undone. Maybe they planned to go back later, but then they saw the priest and he warned them. By this point Jesus was a marked man. Maybe they were afraid to be associated with him. But whatever their motive, they highlight the plight of Israel. Like the people of Nazareth, they took Jesus for granted. They wanted their own personal messiah to do tricks for them. At least these men didn't reject Jesus, but in the end they seem to take the mighty works of God for granted. There's no thanksgiving. They don't glorify him for what he's done. They just take his blessings and run. Which is ironic, because they were Jews, named after Jacob's son, Judah, whose name in Hebrew means “praise”.

And then there's that one Samaritan in the lot. We don't know his motives either. Samaritans weren't particularly interested in Jewish messiahs. He went with the others to see Jesus just because he was desperate and ready to give anything a try. And this Jewish Messiah healed him—an outcast and an outsider—and he was suddenly overwhelmed with gratitude. Jesus owed him nothing, but gave him everything. And so he can't *not* go back. He falls at the feet of Jesus and gives him thanks. And I think this is the reason only Luke tells us this story, because he too was an outsider—not a leper, but a gentile. The God of Israel owed him nothing. The people of the God of Israel treated him like trash. But in Jesus the Messiah, the God of Israel had given him everything.

We get a sense of this as Luke finishes the story. Jesus asks the man, “There were ten of you healed, weren't there? Where are the nine? Is it really the case that the only one who had the decency to give God the glory was this foreigner?” We get the sense that Jesus wasn't just talking to the Samaritan man, but to a larger crowd. The gratitude of this foreigner became a rebuke on Israel. The people whose name means “praise” are just standing around watching a miracle, while this

Samaritan glorifies their God. Jesus had warned them before that God could raise up children for Abraham from the stones and now, here, one of those stones cries out in praise and thanksgiving.

And then, turning back to the man, he said to him, “Get up and be on your way. Your faith has saved you.” All through the story, Luke describes these lepers as being cleansed. Their diseases made them unclean and now they've been healed, cleansed, and restored. But in those final words to the Samaritan, Jesus says, “Your faith has saved you.” Maybe the change from cleansed to saved is because he's a Samaritan. No amount of healing would make him an Israelite or permit him into the temple, but he's still been delivered from his disease. But I think that there's something more to the choice of words. Maybe it's Luke emphasising, as he records in Greek what Jesus would have said in Aramaic, maybe it's Luke emphasising that this man had experienced the same thing he had—that through faith in Jesus, this man who was an outsider and who was despised not just for his disease, but for who he was, this man who could never be part of the old people of Israel, had nevertheless been given a place in the age to come, in the future world of the God of Israel, in that place where our tears are wiped away and everything is set to rights and where the people sing forever and always the glory of God. This no good Samaritan hated by everyone who mattered, suddenly found himself that day a child of Abraham and of the God of Israel.

He was transformed. The promises made to Abraham were fulfilled, even if in a small way with just one person, the promises made to Abraham were fulfilled that day as that Samaritan man knelt as Jesus' feet and glorified God. He went back to Samaria a different person. I fully expect he went back to Samaria proclaiming the glories of God, all because of gratitude for what Jesus had done for him. In that, he showed up Israel and, I think, he shows us up.

Brothers and Sisters, you and I have been confronted with the same saving

mercies of God. We have known his forgiveness and his deliverance through Jesus, who gave his life for us and then rose from the grave. We not only know his common graces every day in the air we breathe and the food we eat, but we know the life of God's kingdom through the gift of his indwelling Spirit. Every Sunday he invites us to his Table to participate once again in this great exodus from sin and death that Jesus has led us through in our baptism. And too often we take it all for granted. He invites us to his Table, but we don't come. He incorporates us into his family, but we neglect our brothers and sisters or we treat them poorly. He gifts us with the fruit of his Spirit, but we instead cultivate what Paul, in our Epistle from Galatians 5, calls the works of the flesh. Paul knew this is what happens when we lose our focus on Jesus and Jesus alone. The Galatians were adding to Jesus. Jesus plus *torah* was their gospel, but in the end it took their eyes off Jesus and they stumbled spiritually. Their problem probably isn't our problem, but there are a thousand other things that can distract us from Jesus and from what God has done for us in him. As I said last week, sometimes we just become so focused looking at the path beneath our feet that we forget to look up. We let ourselves become consumed with the things of this old age that is passing away, with the troubles and difficulties of life, with what we should eat or what we should wear, that we stop seeking after the kingdom of God and his righteousness. And before we know it, we've lost our gratitude. We stop singing the glories of God. We stop living the life of the Spirit.

So Paul wrote to the Galatians and exhorted them in 5:16, "Let me say this to you: live by the Spirit, and you won't do what the flesh wants you to. For the flesh wants to go against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh. They're opposed to each other, so that you can't do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you're not under the law."

Again, their problem was Jesus plus *torah*. We might be trying to do some other variation of Jesus plus works or

Jesus plus love of money or Jesus plus worry over inflation or Jesus plus my worldly activities—again, there are a thousand things that can pull us away from Jesus. Whatever our combination is, losing sight of Jesus, compromising our loyalty to Jesus, is going to work out in losing the life of the Spirit and the warning sign is when we start living the old life of the flesh. Paul goes on and says, "Now the works of the flesh are obvious. They are such things as fornication, uncleanness, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hostilities, strife, jealousy, bursts of rage, selfish ambition, factiousness, divisions, moods of envy, drunkenness, wild partying, and similar things. I told you before, and I tell you again: people who do such things will not inherit God's kingdom."

Brothers and Sisters, the people who will inherit the kingdom are the people who already value it today—the people who have been made new already by Jesus and given the life of the Spirit, because it's Jesus and the Spirit who will—and are presently—making us fit for God's new world. And those people, Paul writes, are characterised by the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. . . . And those who belong to Jesus the Messiah, they crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." But we need to go one verse further with the Epistle. Paul writes to them, "If we live by the Spirit, let's line up with the Spirit." You can't claim to have the life of the Spirit while living out the works of the flesh. And the way we do that—this is the heart of Galatians, which Lord willing we'll start working through *next* Sunday—the heart of Galatians is this message of Jesus and Jesus alone. We need to set our eyes on him and as we set our eyes on him, our hearts and minds will follow. We need to be like the Samaritan leper in the Gospel, with our focus intent on the amazing things that God has done for us in Jesus. We need to have his incarnation, his cross, his shed blood and his resurrection and his ascension always before us. We need always to remember that we who had no share in his inheritance, have

through Jesus been made sons and daughters of God.

Brothers and Sisters, this why we immerse ourselves in his word, that we might always be reminded of his great mercy towards us. And this is why we come to his Table every Sunday. Like the Israelites celebrating the Passover every year to participate for themselves in that great saving act by which he delivered them from Pharaoh's bondage and made them his people, so we come every week and participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus, we participate in this great exodus in which, by his shed blood and his rising again, he has delivered us from our bondage to sin and death and made us his sons and daughters. Come to the Table and remember the mighty, saving works of God. Come to the Table and be refreshed by Jesus and the Spirit. Look up to Jesus and the cross, then go out in the power of the Spirit to proclaim his glories.

Let's pray: Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and love; and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*