

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Robert Alexander
“In The Borderlands”
Luke 17:11-19
21st Sunday After Pentecost
October 9, 2016

Do you like to travel? It seems like many of us do for we are always on the go. Many of us enjoy moving from one place to another, exploring new sites, meeting new people, trying new foods and customs. We might travel by plane or by boat or by train or by car or by bike or by foot. Sometimes we travel just to wander with no specific destination in mind. Other times our travel takes us somewhere specific for a specific purpose. If we venture far enough from home we will inevitably leave our comfort zone and we will encounter ways of life and individuals who are different from us and we will have to decide how we will react. That may happen when we cross an ocean, like our Kenyan partners have done. Or it might happen when we cross town or cross the street. Today's gospel text reminds us that when Christ meets us in those crossing journeys, amazing things can happen.

In this morning's passage we find ourselves in the middle of a journey that began back in Luke 9:51. Luke reminds us in the midst of Jesus' storytelling and preaching and healing that we are on the way to Jerusalem. This is a loaded phrase. On the way to Jerusalem is on the way to confront those who want to silence Jesus. On the way to Jerusalem is on the way to turning our understanding of good news on its head. On the way to Jerusalem is on the way to a new understanding of the Kingdom of God. On the way to Jerusalem is on the way to understanding that the first are last and the last are first and the insiders are out and the outsiders are in and that to really be alive we must die to self and be re-born and set free by the one who came to give us life. On the way to Jerusalem is on the way to the cross...and to resurrection!

And so we find Jesus and his disciples on the way to Jerusalem - traveling through the region between Samaria and Galilee. Some call these places *the borderlands* and they represent those places in our lives where differences clash. World views collide. In the borderlands of nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, culture, religion, politics, and even mental and physical health there can be conflicts. Some are marginalized and pushed to the edges because of their identity. Some gain power and abuse it to maintain control. Some take life away from others in order to try and prop theirs up a little more. Some give themselves away in order that all might be set free and that all might enjoy the blessings of God.

Jesus and his followers traveled through the borderlands between Samaria and Galilee and it was there that they were approached by a group of ten lepers. We are told by scholars that the word translated "leprosy" describes a variety of skin diseases. In the Old Testament book of Leviticus, the Israelites were instructed about how to treat such diseases within the camp. If someone were to develop a skin condition they were to see the Priest immediately. They were pronounced ceremonially unclean and then placed in quarantine - unable to participate in the worshipping life of the community. Every seven days the priest would determine whether the disease had improved or worsened. If the condition developed to the point where raw flesh appeared then the person was pronounced "unclean" and they were removed from the community entirely.

Specific instructions were given for this situation - ⁴⁵“Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ (It reminds me a bit of the boy’s house at Montreat Youth Conf.) The text goes on... ⁴⁶As long as they have the disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp.

So these lepers were at the edge of the village – pushed to the fringes of society and perhaps had heard of this miracle worker – this healer named Jesus. And when they saw him coming their way, keeping their distance they cried out to him, “Master, have mercy on us!” And Jesus responded to them by sending them to the priest so that they could be declared “clean.” For them this was the possibility of a new life – reconnecting with family, with their faith community, and with their village. The text tells us that they followed Jesus’ instructions and as they went one of them realized he had been healed.

I imagine this group shuffling off to the priest and then realizing that they were healed in the midst of their journey. We don’t know how far they got before the healing occurred or how they reacted when they discovered they were healed. Perhaps they ran and skipped and jumped with joy at the realization.

This is a poor comparison but I remember teaching my children how to ride a bike. For months they had used training wheels and finally the day came where they seemed ready for me to take the training wheels off and so we removed them and found a flat place for them to ride. I ran beside them, holding on to the bike seat. “Don’t let go Daddy! Don’t let go!” They shouted. “I won’t let go until I think you are ready.” I would say. And slowly I would release my grip and I would run beside them for a bit. Then there was that moment when they realized that I wasn’t holding the bike any longer. They were pedaling on their own...they were balancing on their own...they were riding a bike on their own. Such freedom! Such joy! This changes everything!

Maybe the lepers, upon realizing that they had been cleansed, upon realizing that their leprosy was gone were filled with that same sense of freedom and joy! This changes everything!

And one of the lepers, we are told, in realizing what happened, turned around and gave glory to God in a loud voice and returned to Jesus and fell at his feet and thanked him. Is this not one of the most beautiful scenes in all of scripture?

And so the early readers of Luke’s gospel account must have been shocked at the very next sentence in the passage when they found out that this one was a Samaritan. We know nothing of the other nine, but we know that this one who returned to Jesus was a Samaritan – one despised by the Jews – one thought to be inferior – one who had been pushed to the margins simply because of his nationality. But Jesus commended him! Jesus lifts him up as an example for us! Jesus tells him to get up off the ground and to go on his way. “Your faith has made you well.” The phrase literally translates as “your faith has saved you!” “Your faith has made you whole!”

The late Charlie Cousar, one of my New Testament professors in seminary, in writing about this passage, stated that we are made aware that not all who are helped by Jesus come to faith. Some take the help, perhaps, as a sign of what they deserve, a just recompense for their years of suffering. Others are perhaps too busy with the new possibilities for a restored life to engage in the unbounded response of the Samaritan. Whatever their reasons, the nine are impoverished by their lack of the joy of praising God, by

their failure to discern the One from whom restoration has come. They become models, in a sense, of what faith is not.¹

And this reminds me of so often what can happen in our faith journey. We enjoy the benefit of God's blessing on a very surface level without allowing ourselves to be open to the richer blessing of the relationship beneath the blessing. Here we are invited to acknowledge our need, ask for God's mercy, receive God's blessing, and respond in gratitude. This gives us the benefit of a relationship with the one who is the author of life and the one who has come to make us whole.

Writer Anne Lamott says that her two favorite prayers are, in the morning, "Help me, Help me, Help me!" and at bed time "Thank you, Thank you, Thank you!" Those prayers open us up to a deep a meaningful relationship with our Lord.

Luke's story echoes this sentiment. The group of lepers at the beginning of the story shout, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" In other words, "Help us!" At the end of the story, only one returns to say "Thank you!" Giving glory to God in a loud voice! And that one is saved – made whole. That one finds true life in a relationship with Jesus.

All this happens in the borderlands – where borders are crossed and relationships are formed and lives are transformed. It happens precisely because of the presence of Jesus and his openness to the other – the one whom society fears and who society pushes to the fringes and even sometimes discards.

Father Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest speaks about this Jesus Strategy.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8YHQjg3eZY>

Jesus stands in the lowly place – the place of humility where the poor, the lonely, the powerless, and the voiceless are. He stands with those who are outside the camp precisely so that the circle might widen.

Boyle says that when we walk with Jesus we are invited to stand with the marginalized in our society...to see them for who they are...and to open up space for relationships to take shape. Those who have been isolated and marginalized may have been excluded and left out. The church welcomes them in. Those on the fringe may be made to feel "unclean" or "unworthy" like they are walking around wearing a scarlet letter! But the church removes the labels of society and replaces that with the label – "Child of God" – creating space for belonging and home.

And so this is part of our calling as God's people...to practice this Jesus strategy. To recognize where the borderlands are in our own lives and in our own communities and to invite Jesus to guide us in those places to stand with those whom we find there and to be open to the relationships that will be created and the healing that will occur and to give thanks to God when it does.

But there is something else. Perhaps there are borderlands within each of us where something has made us feel "unclean." Perhaps there are parts of us that we want to hide in the shadows or which have kept us from feeling completely whole and honest with ourselves and with those we love. Perhaps in the story we find hope for naming those things before God and asking for God's mercy to help bring about healing and to set us free. And we are reminded, when healing, forgiveness, restoration, and wholeness occur, of the importance of gratitude. For it is in our thanksgiving that we open ourselves to a deeper relationship with God and with each other. It is in this place – in this borderland - where we move from disagreement

to peace, where we move from confusion to understanding, where we move from judgment to acceptance, and where we move from isolation to community.

Is Jesus also telling us, along with the man, to get up and go? Perhaps it is in our traveling, in our journeying together in faith through the borderlands where we can recognize those things which separate us. Perhaps as we go we can find God's strength to help us tear down the barriers which divide and destroy community. Perhaps on our way through the borderlands we can learn how to more faithfully exhibit the Kingdom of God to the world.

So...Get up and go in the faith that has made you whole! Get up and go with praise and thanksgiving in your heart! Get up and go through these borderlands in the knowledge that we are not alone and that Christ has set us free!

I close with this prayer by Jan Pickard. Let us pray!

Ever-present God

you meet us in the borderlands, in places neither here nor there,
at times when we are well out of our comfort zone;
even if we don't know where we're going, when we feel most lost,
you are there: **Thank you, God.**

You meet each of us where we are, and many of us in our need,
people marginalized by illness, not wanting to be a burden,
those who see their poverty or problems as unacceptable –
feeling rejected – with faltering self-worth.

It was in the borderlands that Jesus met a band of lepers,
whose livelihood was begging, whose status was untouchable,
and touched their lives with hope.

And it was the Samaritan, the one most of all an outsider,
who turned back to give thanks.

We thank you for all we can learn
from our sisters and brothers who live on the edge,
in poverty, in the borderlands:
about gratitude, grace and healing hope.

Thank you, God. Amen.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Charlie Cousar in Texts for Preaching: Year C. WJK. 1994. P. 554.

ⁱⁱ ~ written by Jan Sutch Pickard, and posted on the Monthly Prayers page of the **Christian Aid** website.
<http://www.christianaid.org.uk/>