



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

OCTOBER 16, 2016
THE TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

In-Between People II Kings 5:1-15c; Luke 17:11-19

When I was a boy, growing up in the First Baptist Church of Chester, South Carolina, I heard this story all the time. I heard it in Sunday School and what we called Sunday evening "Training Union." I heard it in worship and Vacation Bible School. They taught us this story in kindergarten at my church and I am certain that my grandmother read this story to me more times than I can remember. The story of the ten lepers was one of those foundational lessons that helped to shape the lives of boys and girls everywhere. Here in the South, it was a vital part of what author Ferrol Sams describes as being "raised right" because it is all about gratitude. The story reinforces the importance of being grateful and of always saying "thank you" for every kindness received--and even for a few unkindnesses endured!

I learned from this story--and I suspect you did as well--to make certain I was the one who gave thanks for good things given to me. Gratitude is a critical element of life. A grateful heart is far less critical, selfish, and destructive. I think a little more gratitude would do this world a lot of good!

The story of the ten lepers is a story about gratitude, but it is also about so much more! When Jews heard this story, they did not miss the point that out of the ten men who were healed that day, only one of them returned to thank Jesus--and he was a foreigner, a Samaritan! The poor Samaritans were the black sheep of the Semitic family. They were a symbol of everything that was bad--except that Jesus always made them look good. This story, and others like it, gave many a good Jew a second thought about their Samaritan cousins.

There is something else going on in this story, something I think we all understand as well. Luke tells us that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem and was between Samaria and Galilee when he came to a village and encountered these ten men who had leprosy. The term "leprosy" could be applied to any of a number of skin diseases and was not necessarily what we know today as Hansen's Disease. The book of Leviticus (Chapter 13) describes the various symptoms of these diseases and when it was appropriate for a priest to declare a person clean or unclean. Being unclean

did not mean that you had a communicable disease. A particular skin condition might not be contagious at all. Being unclean meant that a person was ritually impure and unfit to worship in the temple. It was not so much that the disease might be transmitted from one person to another as it was that one person's impurity might be contagious. For that reason, a person with leprosy was required to shout "Unclean! Unclean!" whenever he or she was in close proximity of another person. You had to warn the other person so that they would not become impure as well. The consequence of being unclean was that an individual was kept out of the community until a priest in the temple declared them clean. Anyone considered unclean was trapped in between home and the temple, in between welcome and rejection, in between acceptance and fear.

For some reason, when they saw Jesus and his disciples, these ten men did not follow the rule of their community and faith. Instead of yelling "Unclean! Unclean!" they yelled, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" (Luke 17:13) That is not the warning of someone who wants to spare another person the trouble of being alienated from their community. They did not yell, "Stop! Beware! Unclean!" No, they hollered at the top of their lungs, "Jesus, help us!" They begged for mercy. That is the cry of someone who is trapped and desperate. It is the cry of in-between people.

Have you ever found yourself caught in-between? Being stuck in an elevator between floors makes some people anxious and afraid. Getting stuck in an airport between flights can be boring and exhausting. Growing up in a family in which you are between two siblings, one older and one younger, can be maddening at times. Getting stuck in a job between growing stale and unable to advance is disheartening. Struggling with an illness that puts you between unbearable treatments and possible death can be debilitating. Waking up in a relationship that teeters between happiness and loneliness most often results in persistent sadness. Living in a community that is entrenched between worn out expectations and new possibilities is depressing.

What is it like to be an in-between person? Ask a boy on the playground who always gets chosen last on a team, if at all. Ask a bright student who wants to go off to college but cannot afford the tuition. Ask an ordinary looking person, someone who melts into every crowd, who never gets noticed or remembered, what it is like to be ignored. Ask a moderate-minded person who is able to consider both sides of most issues but can never make her point because the voices of the ultra-conservative and the

ultra-liberal always drown her out. Ask the refugee who has been forced to abandon his home and has no where to go. Ask the person of deep faith whose religion is suspect. Ask the person who has struggled for years to come to terms with his identity and finds that he has no place to go, even to the bathroom. Ask the person with a mental illness who pretends to be fine around other people but who lives with fear and anxiety and deep pain. Ask the young adult suffering from abuse, afraid to tell, ashamed to admit. Ask the middle aged person who is squeezed between the needs of parents and the demands of children. Ask the older adult who desperately wants to remain independent but knows the risk is too great. Ask the person who lost their home to flood waters and has no flood insurance. Ask the person who is perceived to be different in any way and feels excluded from community.

Have I hit your in-between place yet? If not, I know that I could because, more often than not, we find ourselves in-between where we don't want to be and where we long to be but cannot get there. Life is hard when you are an in-between person.

Jesus and his disciples were traveling between Samaria and Galilee when they came upon these men who were stuck in this in-between village. Actually, they were in-between the village and the temple where the priest was their only hope for restoration. They were stuck in-between uncomfortable skin conditions and ancient stigmas about safety in the community. They were unclean because various skin conditions, like a variety of life conditions, made them appear impure in the eyes of other people and, they believed, in the eyes of God.

How often do we cry out, "Jesus, have mercy on me!"? And how often do we believe that we are simply stuck in-between forever? I like this story because Jesus offers these men the opportunity to be part of the community again, something for which to be truly thankful. Luke tells us that Jesus saw the men. He looked at them. He paid attention to them. He did not turn the other way, or look past them, or ignore them as we so often have learned to do. Jesus saw them for who they were and then he told them to get going to the temple to show themselves to the priest. He recognized that there was no good reason these men should be separated from their community.

As they began walking, no doubt wondering why they were making such a futile effort when they knew the priest would not declare them clean, they were made clean. Was the skin disease suddenly healed? We don't know. Did their skin become clear and healthy again? We have no idea. Did

something happen within them, perhaps, that made them think differently about themselves and thus manifest that new wholeness in their body? Maybe. All we know is that while they were on the way, they were made clean. They realized that in God's eyes they were not impure.

I believe that God in Christ comes to each and every one of us and sees us as we are. I believe that, if we choose, we can become whole, we can become the persons God intends us to be. I believe that God helps us sort out what it is about us that is good and true and what is harmful and needs to change. Our opinions about ourselves and the attitudes of other people about us are not always correct. God sees us as we are and urges us toward wholeness in ways we know deep in our heart.

We heard another story about leprosy, one written hundreds of years before Jesus encountered these men between Samaria and Galilee. Naaman was the commander of the Aramean or Syrian military. He also had a skin disease which haunted him but obviously did not exclude him from being around other people. Clearly insecure about his illness and its implications, he followed the advice of his serving girl, a young Hebrew who had been taken hostage in war with Israel, someone who was herself trapped in-between the enmity of two nations. Naaman arrived on the doorstep of the prophet Elisha with a large amount of money, lavish gifts, and a sense of his privilege and power. He was ready to take on any challenge the prophet might offer him in order to be cured, but all Elisha requested was that Naaman wash in the Jordan River seven times. Naaman was furious. He expected a respectable faith healer to at least say a few words and wave his hand over the diseased skin. He was a mighty warrior, prepared to do anything difficult in order to be healed. All he was asked was to be humble. He eventually relented. He bathed. He was cured. And he offered thanksgiving to God.

The message in each of these stories is that in order for true healing to occur, there must be a change in attitude in both the person who is understood to be unclean and in the community that calls that person unclean. In order for those of us who are caught in-between in whatever circumstance to be on our way, we often need a change of perspective about ourselves and the community needs to see us in a different light as well.

I like the way Fred Pratt Green speaks to this matter in the text of anthem the choir sang earlier. Listen carefully to his words:

*O Christ, the healer, we have come to pray for health, to plead for friends.
How can we fail to be restored when reached by love that never ends?*

*From every ailment flesh endures our bodies clamor to be freed;
Yet in our hearts we would confess that wholeness is our deepest need.*

*In conflicts that destroy our health, we recognize the world's disease;
Our common life declares our ills. Is there no cure, O Christ, for these?*

*Grant that we all, made one in faith, in your community may find
The wholeness that, enriching us, shall reach and prosper humankind.¹*

There is another stanza which the anthem omits, one which Naaman—and the rest of us—ought to hear:

*How strong, O Lord, are our desires, how weak our knowledge of ourselves!
Release in us those healing truths unconscious pride resists or shelves.²*

Over the weekend, I caught a news item about a high school track meet in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. It told the story of two high school boys who were among 916 other students competing in a cross country meet. During the Junior Varsity run, Sophomore Evan Hansen realized that a runner from another school, a young man named Adam Todd, got distracted by an ambulance going by and veered off the course. Evan ran over to Adam, took him by the hand, and ran back onto the course. They ran together for the final mile and a half because, as Evan said, it was more important for Adam to finish the race. Adam has epilepsy and is autistic.³

At one time, people with Adam Todd's challenges would have been considered to be demon-possessed and unclean. Thank goodness for people like Evan Hansen who look beyond outward conditions to discover the person within. Honestly, Evan does not look much like a runner himself. In the video of this event, he seems to struggle a bit as the two young men make their way to the finish line. What we see, however, is a true champion—a champion of

¹Fred Pratt Green, "O Christ, the Healer, We Have Come," © 1969 by Hope Publishing Co., Carol Stream, IL.

²Green.

³John Campbell, "Show of Sportsmanship between Two Cross-country Runners in Eastern Iowa," KCRG-TV9, October 09, 2016; available online at: <http://www.kcrg.com/content/news/Show-of-sportsmanship-between-two-cross-country-runners-in-eastern-iowa-396485131.html>.

human dignity and compassion. What he did sounds a lot like what Jesus did. Get back on course and along the way you will be healed. As we know, healing and cure are not the same. We can be healed without being cured. Healing is more about wholeness.

Are you stuck in-between? If so, have faith, trust that God has created you to be a special person, full of goodness, and brimming with possibilities. Have faith that you have a place in the community. Wash yourself clean of self-doubt and insecurity. Do you notice other people who are also stuck in-between? Wash yourself clean of fear of other people whom you do not know and of the stigmas that alienate us all. Humble yourself and open your eyes to the persons God created us to be. Join hands and finish the race together. Amen.

October 16, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

O God who hears us, heals us, loves and restores us, receive the deepest prayers of our hearts, for it is indeed your mercy that we seek. We are tired, Lord. We are tired from these many days of anxiety and worry, worn out from the challenges and fears around and within us. We have been battered by wind and watched with dread as the waters rose once again. We have worked and given to help those in our own community who have experienced damage to their homes and businesses, and we watch and wait with grief as neighbors to our east suffer still. We have been battered by harsh words, angry accusations, and growing suspicions as political campaigns divide our families, our community, and our nation. We have been battered by the stress of schedules and finances, of uncertainty and doubt, of broken relationships and broken dreams, of illnesses and sorrows. O God of infinite mercy, we are tired, and with all the strength we can muster, we cry out to you to hear us, heal us, love and restore us once again.

But even as we acknowledge, O God, that we are worn out and bruised by the strain of recent days and confess our inadequacies in the face of so many challenges, we also come giving thanks that even in the midst of such pain, we can rely on your presence to comfort us and your grace to uphold us. As quickly as the winds die down and the flood waters recede, you move the hearts of neighbors and friends and even strangers to respond with compassion to offer prayers and resources and support. Even as candidates and pundits crowd the airwaves with confusing messages and grim predictions, songs of peace, words of assurance, and acts of kindness punctuate the din of voices with glimmers of hope and messages of reconciliation. Even as we pace hospital corridors, agonize over solutions to perplexing problems, or struggle through difficult circumstances, your Spirit nudges us, fills us, surrounds us, offering peace which passes our understanding and light to illumine the path ahead. We thank you, Merciful God, for every good gift which, in these troubling days, sustains our weary minds and bodies and calms our anxious spirits. Out of your abundant resources and your untiring grace, continue to hear us, heal us, love and restore us, not only for our own sake, but also and especially for the sake of the neighbor who depends on our compassion, the stranger who longs for welcome, and the world in need of the love you have called us to share. In the name of Jesus the Christ, who is Love Incarnate, and by the power of your Holy Spirit who abides with us through every storm. Amen.

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