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The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

The Reverend Joseph Kimmel
St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Luke 17:11-19



On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

“And he was a Samaritan.”

A hallmark of the teachings of Jesus and Gospel writers like Luke is the element of surprise. As we read through the Gospels, we constantly come across teachings that shock, surprise, even scandalize and undermine our tendency to think that we’ve got this spiritual life figured out. In recent weeks, we’ve heard Jesus say shocking things like, “If you want to be my disciple, you need to hate your family,” and we’ve read parables about poor people rejoicing in Heaven while the rich burn in torment. These are hard passages, lessons that challenge our assumptions and trouble any easy assurance about whether we truly understand and live out Jesus’ radical teachings. And we hear more shocking words this morning: “And he was a Samaritan.” At first glance, this short sentence might not seem terribly important; we might pass over it as a throw-away comment about some guy’s ethnic roots. But in reality, I think this line is really the heart of today’s passage, a brief but powerful statement which challenges any self-satisfied notions of who truly is righteous, who truly is close to the heart of God.

In the hearts of first-century Jews, the term “samaritan” would have evoked a revulsion akin to what you might feel when you hear the term “sex offender.” Hailing from the region of Samaria, which sliced through ancient Israel, separating Israel’s

north from its south, Samaritans shared centuries of built-up hostility and mistrust with their Jewish neighbors. While both their bloodlines and their religious traditions enjoyed significant overlap, the differences between the two groups were just a little too great for most Jews and Samaritans to overcome. In the eyes of most Jews of Luke’s day, Samaritans had always been from the wrong side of the tracks and always would be just a group of misfits best reviled and avoided. And the Old Testament stories about Samaritans’ ancient roots and jaded history made things all the worse: Genesis 34, for instance, relates a terrible story about the rape of Dinah, the daughter of Jacob (aka Israel, the forerunner of all Israelites), a rape perpetrated by a man named Shechem (aka Samaria, the forerunner of all Samaritans). So from the very beginning, says Genesis, there has been enmity, distrust, and even outright sexual violence between Samaritans and Jews.

And so first-century Jews, Luke’s original audience, would simply have assumed—simply would have “known”—that Samaritans were not good people: they hailed from bad stock; like their rapist forefathers, they were surely immoral, unquestionably far from God’s ways and God’s love.

But the brilliance—and challenge—of this morning’s passage is that here Luke flips the script: echoing Jesus’ parable of the “Good Samaritan” from ch. 10, Luke shows us here in ch. 17 not only that one of these despised, “obviously ungodly” people has faith strong enough to heal disease, but even more so that this supposedly terrible person is the only one of the ten healed by Jesus with a heart of gratitude, the only one who thanks Jesus rather than taking him for granted.

Whom do you find repellent this morning? Someone whose name or image causes your face to contort in mild (or not so mild) disgust? Or, if “disgust” feels too strong, whom do you believe to be the opposite of godliness? A person or group that just strikes you as no good? Maybe a certain group of disreputable people come to mind or maybe a particular individual who represents to you everything that is wrong with the world.

About nine years ago, a bus driver in Buffalo named Darnell Barton had just picked up 20 high school students at a stop near an expressway overpass when he spotted a woman in her mid-twenties climbing over the overpass guardrail. To his alarm, Barton

noticed that the woman was staring down at the traffic speeding along the expressway below. As cars zoomed beneath her, Barton carefully pulled his bus into the middle of the overpass, opened the door, and then yelled out to the woman, “Ma’am, are you okay?” Seeing her begin to lean out over the expressway, Barton quickly shifted the bus into park, hurried down the stairs, and cautiously approached the young lady. Reaching the guardrail’s edge, Barton slowly extended an arm, wrapping it around the unresponsive woman. Barton later would describe his life-saving actions as follows: “I grabbed her arm and put my arm around her and said, ‘Do you want to come on this side of the guardrail?’ and that was actually the first time she spoke to me. She said ‘Yes.’” As astonished onlookers dialed 911, Barton then wrapped the woman in a bear hug, lifted her up and over the rail, and sat down with her on the other side, starting a conversation with her until a corrections officer and mental health counselor arrived to take over. Barton then calmly returned to his bus and was greeted by a standing ovation from the 20 amazed high schoolers who had just witnessed his life-saving intervention. Finally, about a week or two later, a wealthy businessman heard about Barton’s heroic deed and sent him a very thoughtful note which read, in part, “Although I know to you it was just a warm-hearted first response to a dangerous situation, your quick thinking resulted in a life being saved, and for that you should be rewarded.” Enclosed in this letter was a check for some thousands of dollars.

Now, as wonderful and heroic as Barton’s actions were, what I really want to emphasize this morning is the remarkably kind-hearted generosity of the businessman who, out of the blue, and for no apparent reason other than a desire to bless someone who had blessed others, sent Barton a warm note and a large check. Now, who was this remarkably generous individual? ... “Oh no,” you might be thinking, “not him.” Yes, yes, our own former President Donald J. Trump... isn’t that just like a stab in the abdomen this morning to all you who vote Democratic? Not Donald, anyone but Donald; he’s supposed to be the “bad guy,” the antithesis of everything good and right in the world, the figure of unmitigated evil whom we self-righteously define ourselves in opposition to—not a man who rewards kindness with large personal checks out of the goodness of his supposedly “black” heart.

My point is not to exalt one particular person or political

party. We could very easily find a similar story featuring Joe Biden, Nancy Pelosi, or whomever any Republican voters here might be tempted to demonize.

My point, furthermore, is not to suggest that one act of kindness excuses a long list of bad behavior but rather that, as conveyed by Luke's Gospel this morning, the kingdom of God—and particularly those in or out of God's kingdom—is a much more complex issue than we might imagine. We thus would do well not to presume to know the hearts of our fellow humans, let alone the heart and the judgments of God. Those whom we are certain to be far from God's love, like the Samaritan in the eyes of Luke's Jewish readers, may shockingly be closer to the heart of God than even we ourselves.

And therefore not only should we avoid presuming to know the hearts of others, but we would do well to perhaps even learn from those whom we are so sure have nothing to teach us. Luke's story not only seeks to challenge the self-satisfied judgments and presumptions of his Jewish readers, but even more to suggest that these readers might actually learn something from the despised Samaritan. It is not enough, says Luke, just to avoid judging this guy; in fact, writes Luke, this man whom you assume to be among the ungodly has much to teach you: while ten lepers were cured (nine of whom were apparently fellow Jews), it is only the lone Samaritan who has gratitude enough in his heart to express thanks to Jesus, their common healer.

As some of you might know, I grew up in a conservative evangelical church in Chicago. After college I joined an international, largely evangelical missions organization and then travelled to Tibet on a student visa as an "undercover" Protestant missionary. Prior to arriving at Tibet University, I spent several months in an intensive missionary training school. There I was inculcated in the tenets of a missional theology that categorized reality according to a very binary system: the Church vs. the world, the saved vs. the lost (or "the damned"), Christ vs. Satan, and us vs. them. In this arrangement, the Tibetan Buddhists among whom I would soon be living were clearly on the losing side, and since they were, unbeknownst to them, allied with Satan himself, they needed my pure, righteous testimony to save them from hellfire and help them fix their hopeless ways. Well, you can imagine my shock when after moving to Tibet, I began to actually meet some real Tibetans, and in great contrast to what I had just learned

about them at missionary school, discovered that they actually were not hopelessly downtrodden or wickedly bound to all sorts of satanic evil. In fact, to my tremendous surprise, many of the Tibetan friends I made in Lhasa were quite clearly much more Christ-like than I myself, which caused me to wonder “Who really is lost here?,” “Who really is following the ways of Jesus?,” and “How might I actually have much to learn from those who I’d assumed to be satanically bound?” Now, fifteen years later, I need to thank those “lost” Tibetan Buddhists for helping to start me on a long, tumultuous journey of questioning aspects of my evangelical faith, a process that next January will culminate in my ordination as an Episcopal priest.

I wonder whom you might consider to be among “the lost” this morning. Who, for you, are those “morally lost” folks who just seem to be paragons of iniquity, exemplars of the worst of humanity, perhaps even among the “basket of the deplorables,” to quote Hillary Clinton? Each of us has our own list; maybe your list includes: Trump 2024 supporters? or Elizabeth Warren 2024 supporters? or those couch-potatoes who delight in watching *Bachelor in Paradise* and other rather trashy reality shows? Or those people, addicted to opioids, whom we see begging on the side of the road? or those people who act, speak, smell, dress, worship, vote differently than we do? or those people who (fill in the blank)?

Luke’s Gospel this morning challenges us to consider what we might learn from “those people.” Let me be clear: I’m not suggesting that we just sweep under the rug immoral behavior. Luke’s passage is not saying that this Samaritan guy is necessarily an immaculate saint. We can honestly and legitimately point out—in a spirit of love—flaws and shortcomings—even sometimes misconduct and outright evil—that truly need to be identified, named, rebuked, and corrected. But the challenge and brilliance of the Gospel message is that, while engaging in appropriate rebuke, we simultaneously acknowledge our own shortcomings, our own areas where the “despised other” actually might helpfully correct us.

Who is your Samaritan this morning? Who is that person that surely cannot be close to God’s heart? Who would you say is the least likely person that you could learn something from? Thank God for that person, because he, she, or they offer you a source

of invaluable instruction and spiritual guidance. Like the Jews who first read Luke's passage, we too may be initially shocked to consider that we have anything to learn from those Samaritans in our lives, but in the ironic brilliance of God's kingdom those "most despised" others actually become the most essential.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.