

Sunday, October 9 – 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Preacher: Rev. Douglas J. Brouwer

Sermon Title: “Where are they?”

Scripture Reading: Luke 17:11-19

(The second reading for Sunday will be Psalm 66:1-12.)

1. Vs. 11 – “On the way to Jerusalem...” – I want to note here that the master storyteller Luke, easily the best storyteller among the four gospel writers (think of the Christmas story in Luke 2), has constructed his gospel as a journey to Jerusalem. The journey ends at the cross, of course, but Jesus actually enters the city in Luke 19:28. I note this detail to raise appreciation for the skill of the gospel writers, as well as the challenge they faced in constructing their stories. They wrote as they did to communicate the best news the world has ever heard. Imagine taking on that assignment!
2. Vs. 11 – “...Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.” Some scholars cite these words as evidence that Luke was a foreigner and wasn’t all that familiar with Israel’s geography, because it’s not clear what “region” he is referring to with these words. Typically, Galileans walked (or rode) many kilometers out of their way to avoid Samaria, since contact with Samaritans was not advised. Even today, tourists typically drive south along the Jordan and then take a right turn at Jericho in order to ascend to Jerusalem, instead of going through Samaria (or what is now the West Bank). So, what is Luke referring to? The poet in me likes to think that Luke is referring here not so much to a geographical area, but to a kind of “no man’s land,” a region that exists only in a spiritual sense. Without spending too much time on this little curiosity in the text, what do you think is going on here? Have you ever spent time, spiritually speaking, in the region between Galilee and Samaria?
3. This story – the healing or cleansing of 10 lepers – is found only in Luke’s gospel. Lepers – not to mention shepherds, tax collectors, Samaritans, women, and children – are important for Luke’s storytelling purposes. These are the people who existed at the margins of first century culture. Lepers literally existed at the margins of culture because they were forbidden to come into contact with those without the disease. It’s an old theme, but it’s not a bad idea to remember it: where and with whom do you suppose Jesus would spend his time if he came to Zürich today? With IPC at worship – or elsewhere? And then the follow-up question is: shouldn’t we be spending our time where Jesus would choose to spend his?
4. Vs. 13 – “They raised their voices” – in this context these words have the connotation of prayer! Loud, pleading prayer!
5. Vs. 14 – “And as they went, they were made clean.” Their healing, curiously, was not instantaneous. The way Luke expresses it, literally, is “and it happened, in their going, [that] they were made clean.” Maybe this is a minor point, but I think I see something profound here. They were willing to trust Jesus and carry out his instructions, so as they are making their way with trusting spirits to the priests, they discover that they have been cured. I wonder if there are more places in our lives

where we need to trust Jesus' words – and then, after trusting, after doing what he says to do, we make the discovery that healing has occurred. Vs. 15 tells us that one of the lepers – “seeing that he was cured” – turned back to thank Jesus. His cure was an awakening. His eyes of faith have been opened.

6. Vs. 15 – “came back” – literally, to convert means to “turn around.” This one leper has had a conversion experience! He was headed in one direction, and now he is headed in another. Isn't that what conversion means to you? A 180-degree turn in life? How would you describe your own conversion, if not a “complete turnaround” in your life? And a radical break with the past? Vs. 16 tells us that he “fell at the feet of Jesus” and “thanked him,” which is what we do too in our conversion, don't we?
7. Vs. 17 – After asking “were not ten made clean?” and “where are the other nine?” Jesus says to the one leper, “Rise and go, your faith has saved you.” That's the literal translation from the Greek, although most translations have “your faith has healed you” or perhaps “your faith has made you whole” or my personal favorite “your faith has brought you salvation.” In Luke's gospel, to be saved often means the same thing as to be healed or made well. Jesus never draws a distinction between them. I think it might be useful for you to reflect on this! If you are saved, are you also healed? And if you are healed, are you also saved? What does it mean that Jesus lumps these ideas together?
8. In a couple of different places, Jesus seems to take an ironic tone with foreigners. In vs. 18, Jesus asks, “Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” The use of foreigner here is a bit jarring. The Jews did not have a high regard for Samaritans, but it surprises us to hear Jesus indulge in their prejudice. In Matthew 15, Jesus has an interesting conversation in which he seems to call a Syro-Phoenician woman a “dog.” First-century Jews routinely referred to Gentiles – and especially Syro-Phoenicians, whom they hated – as dogs, but to hear Jesus use the word is a bit jarring. Most interpreters have guessed that Jesus adopts an ironic tone in these situations. He uses the word with a self-conscious tone. He says the word – dog or foreigner – as if to say, “I know how other people refer to you, but I see you as a human being.” Interesting, isn't it, how these ethnic and racial put downs have been with us for so many centuries?