

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c ~ Luke 17:11-19

Surprised by Mercy

October 13, 2019 ~ 18th Sunday after Pentecost

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Introduction to Second Scripture Lesson:

“On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.” That’s how our story begins (Luke 17:11) . And in that one sentence, we are reminded of the looming shadow of the cross getting closer and closer, as Luke signaled all the way back in 9:51, “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set us face to go to Jerusalem.” Here we are in chapter 17, still on that long road that leads to the cross. Today, we are told he is literally traveling through a region between. It happens to be on the border, the edges where Samaria and Galilee are joined. Although most of us have not set foot on that particular soil, I think we all know about “the region between.” We have all been there. And some of us may be there now. The region between testing and diagnosis. The region between treatment and outcome. Illness is always a region between. But there are others: The region between the application and the job; the region between “just friends” and something more—before we know which way it’s going to. We’d rather be here or there. But so much of our spiritual growth really happens in that place not many of would choose to be: in the region between.

That’s where our story picks up—but not where it ends. Like our first lesson, we find ourselves in the company of people with a serious skin disease, identified in the Bible as leprosy. And like our first story, a merciful healing occurs. This time, not through Elisha, but about 900 years later, through Jesus, who happens to be walking along this borderland, this region between, where ten lepers, leap at the sight of Jesus and his disciples.

Sermon:

What do a trafficked foreign slave girl and a stigmatized, chronically ill man have in common? Yup: they are the heroes in these stories. An Israelite servant girl to Naaman’s wife in our first lesson, and a Samaritan leper living and lurking on the edge of town in our second lesson. Neither is given a name. Yet these unnamed characters are the real heroes in these real stories in the Bible. Two stories that also made it into the Revised Common Lectionary 3-year cycle of scripture readings which gives them a pretty good shot at making it all the way to the pulpits of churches all over the world once every three years. Like today, right now.

A piece of lectionary trivia that is perhaps not that trivial: I happened to notice that this same text which only occurs in the Gospel of Luke, and just once every three years as the lectionary gospel reading, came up as the gospel text on Sunday, October 11, 1998. I had made a note when preparing the sermon that week, it was the week the impeachment inquiry on President Clinton was opened up. And here we are again in 2019, with impeachment inquiry in the air, again. Christ, have mercy on us!

At one point, I was going to title this sermon, “Minor Characters.” Seemed appropriate: Naaman’s wife’s servant girl and the Samaritan Leper were living their lives in a minor key, under a cloud of sadness, loss, and invisibility. They were people living on the edge, in the shadows, under the radar to avoid further shame and humiliation. Yet today, out of the shadows they emerge as heroes. Poster children for how God’s mercy can work miracles through anyone—and especially people on the edge. But I think they would want me to focus on the miracle of God’s mercy, that just happened to work through them. That’s the story that keeps surprising us.

So here we go: I need to warn you: Your skin may get itchy during this sermon. Luke didn’t need to say much about lepers because his immediate audience knew exactly what that meant. They lived with—or made a point of not living with—lepers. Leprosy was a dreaded, but common and contagious family of skin diseases in those days. It was so common that lepers had rules to follow set out in the Book of Leviticus, set up as good health precautions. Priests, as described in Leviticus, were the ones who diagnosed Lepers definitively with the disease and pronounced them “unclean.”

As for the lepers Leviticus ordered them, “The one who has the disease shall wear torn clothes, let the hair of his head hang loose, he shall cover his lip and cry, “Unclean, unclean.” He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall dwell outside the camp.” So, they were shunned by everyone else. Not only because they were contagious but I think also because people were afraid of their pain, their loneliness. Lepers were a visual reminder of what everyone avoided. Their worst fear: to be an outsider, a loser.

On the day our story takes place, being obedient lepers, they were living outside their village, on the edge in the region between. When they saw Jesus, they kept their distance, following the rules, and cried out to Jesus, “Have mercy on us!” What did they have to lose? But shock of all shocks: Jesus does. Jesus has mercy on them in a major way. Perhaps beyond what they were hoping for. Jesus also knows the rules of his people, so he tells them to go to the priests who can perform the rites of purification—the first step of shifting out of loser lane and into the mainstream. And so off they go.

But that is not the end of the story. If it were, we may never have known about this particular healing. It’s what happens next that gets stranger and more surprising. One of the 10 about to be former-lepers, turns back to give thanks and praise to Jesus, once he sees what was going on. He can not believe this amazing good thing that is happening to him. Someone who probably forgot what a good day could even feel like. Someone who had stopped dreaming for anything more than basic comfort and protection from scorn. Then Luke simply adds the sentence: “And he was a Samaritan.”

You’ve heard about those Samaritans before. Especially in Luke. You can’t get away from them. They keep popping up as the despised underdogs who do the right thing. Like the “Good Samaritan” whom Jesus chose to model what it really means to love your neighbor as yourself. But who were they? Did you ever wonder why the Jews seemed to despise them so much? Samaritans were inhabitants of the land, Samaria, which is a threshold, the space between

Israelites and the rest of the world. Samaritans were hated and despised by Jews, even though they shared ancestry and overlapping religious beliefs. Their relationship to Jews was something like feuding Christians these days. But Samaritans were considered to be unclean people because by Jesus' time they were descendants of mixed marriages between Jews and Gentiles. So, our Samaritan leper here in today's story was a double outcast. The one who least expects it, he is the one who comes running back, throws himself at Jesus' feet, prostrate in disbelief. He must have been puzzled and amazed, wondering "How can this be happening to me?" We can't really know, nor do we need to. This is a story about the surprise of mercy in the region between.

That's the thing about mercy: It comes unexpectedly: not according to our plans or expectations. We don't know when it's going start. Or where it will lead. That's the beauty of it. And its challenge. It can really throw you off your game. Sometimes it takes way too long. You wait. You get angry. Especially if you think you are in control and a person who has it together. Like the King of Israel tearing his robe off, sure that this letter from King Aram was about anything but a mercy mission. That's not what kings do. The same goes for the General, commander: Naaman didn't want to go wash in that muddy, dirty River Jordan. Didn't Elisha know who he was talking to? For starters, he was ticked off by the way the prophet Elisha failed to come out and greet him. Our biblical writer does a great job of describing just how much Naaman wanted to command the mercy move. But that's not the way mercy works. Naaman's servants knew that. These servants were another group of unnamed minor characters who got their master back on the mercy path. They knew what Naaman did not know, yet: Mercy can surprise, upend, rearrange and reorient." Get over yourself, Naaman. Do what the prophet says, even if you don't like it." And get ready to be surprised by mercy.

Wouldn't you agree? That's some crazy stuff that mercy jam. It's hard to know when mercy begins to bring healing of bodies, minds, or spirits. Including our body politic. But we have some agency here. Yes: Mercy can begin by opening oneself to those with whom one might disagree strongly. Mercy doesn't end there, of course. But it begins with small acts of understanding, which can lead to life-changing experiences of love. Here are a couple of ideas for you to consider: Try exposing yourself to different views about crucial issues facing our country by watching both Fox News and MSNBC. Try to listen and to open yourself up to to understanding the other side even a little better. We can understand, respect and also disagree. This is also a kind of "region between" where mercy can surprise us. The second idea is to attend the class Dan Crump and I are teaching that begins today after worship where we will get a chance to let mercy guide us as we talk together about the complicated, personal and political topic of abortion. When we let Christ lead the way, Divine Mercy can join us all together in spite of our differences. And yes, we can all grow spiritually from this experience.

I decided not to title my sermon "minor characters" because I don't believe in God's realm there are any minor characters. My prayer is that we would come to see others and ourselves, more and more as God's sees others and sees us. In "the region between" I believe we all have an important part to play in the surprising power of Divine Mercy.