

Sermons at Oak Grove

October 14, 2007

Luke 17:11-19

"It's A Matter of Faith"

By Andries J Coetzee

Scripture Readings

Luke 17: 11-19

¹¹On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹²As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" ¹⁴When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?" ¹⁸Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

Sermon: "It's A Matter of Faith"

With the first reading of today's text, memories of childhood interpretation when I was in Sunday school, came to mind. "You ought to be more thankful for what you have and for what God has done for you!" or "Don't be ungrateful like so many, even religious people, are!" or even on another level, "The Jews are bad people and the Samaritans are good, as the Samaritan was the only one among the ten who thanked Jesus for healing him".

The temptation to moralize this text is very strong. But this text is not about moralizing. It is about the reality of the Kingdom of God among us. "The appearance of lepers was a ritual and spiritual problem in the culture where Jesus lived. These people were more than just potentially infectious; they were ritually unclean. They were cast out from all social structures, because their disfigurement was thought to be spiritually deadly and contagious.

The group of lepers in our Gospel Reading apparently included nine Judeans and one Samaritan. They were all equally unclean and the difference in their religious practice was irrelevant now as they were grafted into a community by this spiritually contagious disease. But, there was a way back in to the social structure for them. If a priest declared them clean after an appropriate examination, they could rejoin their own societies.

That's why Jesus did what he did here. He did not say (in this story), go home because God has healed you. He said "Go show yourselves to the priests." After realizing they were healed along the way, they did exactly what Jesus told them to do ... all but one, that is: The Samaritan. Jesus told them "Go, show yourselves to the priests." The Samaritan, when he realized he was healed, did not go to the priests, but came back to Jesus to thank him.

In the cultural rules of Jesus' day, you would NOT thank a person until you had actually been fully helped. That just wasn't done. So, the nine who went on their way and did what Jesus told them to do weren't being ungrateful. They were doing the normal thing in such circumstances. They would thank the priest who declared them clean.

The Samaritan returning to Jesus, ritually, then, WAS showing himself to the priest! Jesus is the priest. Jesus commends his faith, declares him whole and sends him straight home" (Worship

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The story is deliberately subversive. Samaritans were not respected by many, and in Jesus' words the man was a foreigner, someone of another race. You wouldn't expect a Samaritan to say, "Thank you!" or to "praise God", because you all know what Samaritans are like (["First Thoughts on Year C Gospel Passages in the Lectionary,"](#) Pentecost 20, William Loader, Murdoch University, Uniting Church in Australia).

As the good Samaritan embodies love for neighbor, so this healed Samaritan embodies love for God. Together they embody what Jesus sees as the greatest commandment of all, saying; ³⁰"you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." ³¹The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself (Mark 12.26-36) (["First Thoughts on Year C Gospel Passages in the Lectionary,"](#) Pentecost 20, William Loader, Murdoch University, Uniting Church in Australia).

In this story then the "wrong person" according to common prejudice is seeing Jesus for who and what He is ... the priest to the unclean and the foreigner. Then rubbing in the salt, Luke has Jesus announce that this tenth leper, the Samaritan, has been made whole, an image of full salvation, the very aspiration of the best people who would seek to avoid Samaritans and others who today might be written off (["First Thoughts on Year C Gospel Passages in the Lectionary,"](#) Pentecost 20, William Loader, Murdoch University, Uniting Church in Australia).

In Luke 17, the verses following our reading, says; "Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

The Kingdom of God is among us, and those who "belong" run the risk of missing it, and those who are the "outsiders" and the "despised" become a model of salvation. A simple but disturbing story that lives itself out in every generation (["First Thoughts on Year C Gospel Passages in the Lectionary,"](#) Pentecost 20, William Loader, Murdoch University, Uniting Church in Australia).

Today on this Presbyterian HIV/Aids awareness Sunday our denomination calls us, the body of Christ, to continue Jesus' ministry to the unclean and the foreigner. In its response to Aids worldwide, our denomination published in their "It's a Matter of Faith" literature (<http://www.pcusa.org/aids-international/index.htm>).

"Heads of state, corporate CEOs, world-renowned entertainers and famous philanthropists are calling attention to the AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa. They are talking about billions of dollars for anti-retroviral drugs, a worthy cause that promises to extend the lives of people living with HIV/AIDS. Meanwhile African churches know this is only one piece of the battle against AIDS. They are at work every day promoting prevention efforts, holding the hands of dying patients, and caring for AIDS orphans.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s support of its African partners in these efforts demonstrates solidarity, helps some of the world's most marginalized and oppressed people, and models sound stewardship.

African churches' AIDS ministries reach from urban centers to rural villages. "We support the effort to provide anti-retroviral drugs, but that's not where we are putting our focus and resources now," says Joy Raatz, international HIV/AIDS initiative facilitator for the PC(USA). "Churches in Africa are doing some amazing things in the fight against AIDS and we are privileged to be able to support them by sending people and resources and by praying for them."

Churches are effective in the fight against AIDS because they are trusted and because they proclaim hope amid death and despair. African churches believe behavior can be transformed because the gospel can change hearts. They call people to responsible sexual behavior not just to avoid HIV/AIDS but also to urge them toward more faithful living.

Hearts changed by the gospel extend welcome and acceptance to AIDS patients, a population often stigmatized, and raise the status of women, who often are consigned to a life of abject poverty and limited choices.

"I've been impressed with the leadership role women in Africa are taking in Africa," Raatz says. "They are involved in every aspect of the fight against AIDS."

Part of that effort, she says, is women helping women move toward economic self-sufficiency by teaching them skills that generate income.

Women are better able to avoid lifestyles and life situations that put them at risk for HIV/AIDS if they have some economic independence, says Raatz, who is completing a doctorate in health behavior at Indiana University. "I used to work at a health department in the States with women who were at high risk for AIDS," she explains. "I would visit homeless shelters and see how poverty is a contributing factor for AIDS because these women saw their life as hopeless and without choices. This is even more true in Africa."

In this context African churches are working to bring hope, and contributions from U.S. Presbyterians are helping their efforts. For African churches this is not just about fighting AIDS or improving society. It's a Matter of Faith".

Amen