

“ON THE WAY TO JERUSALEM”

a sermon on 2 Kings 5:1-15, 2 Timothy 2:8-15, Luke 17:11-19

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It was way back in the ninth chapter of Luke’s Gospel account that Luke reports: “When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” In the ten chapters between that “notice” and Jesus’ actual *entry* into the Holy City that we celebrate as “Palm Sunday,” Luke’s narration and Jesus’ words themselves occasionally remind the readers of that fact.

This is a “literary tool” Luke uses to remind the readers that the story, or the teaching, or the rebuke to follow needs to be read in light of the coming events of Jesus’ death and resurrection, and that Jesus himself used that time of his ministry to teach his disciples what they needed to know about the time to come, when he would no longer be with them physically.

And so when this morning’s Gospel begins, “on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee,” Luke is actually conveying several important contextual points to help us understand what is about to happen.

First, hear this in light of what will happen in Holy Week. And then, hear that Jesus was at the ‘edge of the empire,’ as it were, near the border of Samaria, that was filled with what the faithful Jews of those days considered heretics – who, in the first place, didn’t consider Jerusalem the “Holy City,” and in fact hadn’t since way back in the Old Testament era of the divided kingdom, so for basically a thousand years.

And not only *that*, but the Assyrians, who overran and ruled that land in the eight century BC were brutal people. To ensure the future loyalty of those they came to rule, they took great numbers of the inhabitants of those lands and “dispersed” them into other places, and then repopulated them with former residents of *other* captured lands.

And again, that all happened many hundreds of years before Jesus’ time. So by the first Century, the “Samaritans” were a “mixed race” people with a mish-mash of religious beliefs and loyalties. Faithful Jews wanted nothing to do with them.

The story that then follows is about the healing of ten lepers. Regarding lepers, the book of Leviticus states, “the person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean. He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp” (Lev 13:45-46 NRS).

Lepers in Jesus day lived in “colonies,” and stayed away from others, except for frequenting the known travel-ways of the land, where (from a distance), they would beg for charity.

The first point many commentators note in looking at this passage is the irony that the historic “wall of division” between Jews and Samaritans is apparently broken down in this colony by their common plight. If *all* of the lepers had been Samaritans, after all, Jesus words wouldn’t make any sense. Clearly, this little band of lepers included both Jews and Samaritans.

How often in life it works that way. In times of *tragedy*, we can come together across lines of race, or religion, or social standing, or any other usual “divisions” that keep us apart. On a hopeful note, that also happens when it comes to *mission*.

As one small example to which I can point, our synod’s popular mission, *Living Waters for the World*, that works to make clean water available for “all God’s children,” and that has active in-country networks in 11 different nations, attracts Christians from a wide variety of perspectives, and more than that, even non-Christian entities, and secular entities. And when congregations of our denomination with significant Living Waters ministries have *left* the denomination over “theological differences” with the PC(USA), they have generally *remained* involved in and committed to their work with Living Waters.

Human needs, it seems, tend to “trump” religious and theological differences and divisions.

But this passage is more complex than that. When the lepers call out to Jesus for mercy, Jesus tells them to go and show themselves to the priests . . . who had the authority to “proclaim” them clean. The law prescribed what they were to then do, to be allowed back into the good graces of the community – by ritually cleansing themselves, so they could re-enter the temple.

And it says that “they went.” They were *obedient* to what Jesus directed. As a result of that obedience, they were healed *on their way to the priests*.

Now think about that for a moment. Why would a *Samaritan* go to a Jewish priest for such a proclamation in the first place? All he would receive there would be *condemnation* for his heretical beliefs. So upon being healed, the *Samaritan* “turns back,” and gives thanks to Jesus *directly*. The others, presumably Jews, are no less obedient, and again presumably, go on to the priests to do what Jesus *told* them to do – with the goal of being “restored” to their communities and families.

So Jesus’ seeming indictment of the nine who didn’t return is a little hollow . . . unless you read it in light of the context of Jesus being *on the way to Jerusalem*. He was going there to *fulfill*, and thereby *replace* the religious system that had come to focus people more on *themselves* than on the greater good – on “personal righteousness” before God, rather than the larger community and its needs. To the extent the faithful were “generous,” it was to fulfill the requirements of the law, not to *react* to human need.

And then, recalling again that this Gospel was written sometime in the last third of the first Century, when Gentiles had begun to be converted to the faith, it is *telling* that Jesus is willing to proclaim to the healed Samaritan, “your faith has made you well” without any further instruction for cleansing. In other words, Jesus “proclaimed” that leper clean . . . without requiring him to buy into Israel’s faith system and practices – without having to “become” a Jew as that was understood by the faithful in Jerusalem.

It was classic “foreshadowing” of things to come, and an important word from Jesus himself in support of what the latter first Century community was learning – that Jesus was calling people into the Church *directly* through faith in him, without their having to accept adherence to the Law of Moses.

Although it isn’t mentioned in this morning’s text, this story also calls to mind the story of Naaman – which is our Old Testament lesson for the morning. And most likely not by coincidence. In the verses leading up to the *other* main story in Luke’s account about the healing of a leper, back in chapter four, Jesus refers to Naaman directly, saying, “There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” And *then* it says, “when they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage” (Luke 4:27-28 NRS).

Again, God’s plan was *always* greater in “scope” than one people. God’s mercy and grace extend to *all God’s children*, and Jesus invites *everyone* to live in faith.

So, what does that have to say to *us*?

Well, beyond the obvious theological affirmation of our Christian faith as its own religion – built on the *foundation* of Judaism, but not “dependent” on it for salvation – it think it is also a *warning* about not letting our Christian practice become what the practice of Judaism had become in Jesus’ day. Jesus wasn’t *against* Judaism. He was against religious practice that turned people *inward*, rather than *outward* – focused only on “personal” righteousness, rather than on the “common good,” the needs of others, making the world better for *everyone*.

And at the end of the day, I don’t think it is *just* Judaism that had – or has – that tendency.

In the first place, I think Christian traditions that put too much emphasis on “personal salvation” as though it is the *only* goal of the Church’s mission tend to promote that tendency. Not that personal salvation is *unimportant*. But the church’s mission in the world is *more* than that. Our own denomination’s statement on the church’s mission lists *six* goals, as a matter of fact: “the proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of humankind,” yes, but *also*, “the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world” (*Book of Order* F-1.0304).

And then too, I think *any* person of faith can become complacent and self-satisfied – concluding that they have done “enough,” given “their share,” lived “acceptably,” and therefore no longer need to be *concerned* about others. And that is never an option for Christians. There is *always* work to be done both in our own lives and journeys, and out there – in the church, and in the world.

Paul’s words to Timothy are instructive: “do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.”

Jesus’ main complaint against the Judaism of his day, it seems to me, is that it had led to complacency. We need to ensure that we always allow the Scriptures and the Spirit to call us *forward*, inspire us to care more, and pray for the courage to live more faithfully.

May that be our goal. And to God be the glory.