

Luke 17: 11-19
Creekside COB
October 14, 2007

“Grateful Strangers”

“What are you going this way for?” my mother asked when I drove around Elkhart. “How am I supposed to find my way through town when you never go the same way twice? Why don’t you go the same way?” I said I didn’t want to wear ruts in the road. I like taking roundabout ways to my destination. I like the change of scenery, and the chance to see new things along the way.

In Luke 17 Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. It is code for his journey to the cross. “Why is he going this way?” the disciples wondered. Rather than take the direct route through Galilee, Jesus went through the border area with Samaria. The Jews nor Samaritans did not cross the border between them. They despised each other. Near a village on this border of enmity, Jesus encountered ten lepers.

The devastating disease had taken their extremities and disfigured their faces. Lepers were unclean and totally cut off from society. They were forced to live at the periphery in total physical, psychological and spiritual isolation.

They saw Jesus from a distance and shouted, “Jesus, have mercy on us!” What transpired was remarkable—both for what happened and what didn’t happen. Jesus said nothing about their faith or the forgiveness of sin. He didn’t touch them or tell them they were healed. “Go show yourselves to the priests,” is all he said. Jesus simply repeated what the scripture said. Before they could return to society, priests had to certify that they were in fact, healed and clean.

But what happened next puts us in into an, “interpretive rut in the road.” One leper returned to thank Jesus. Just one. The rest

scored 90% on the ingratitude scale. The typical interpretation of the text makes it a lesson about gratitude. But there is more to the story than an appeal to be thankful.

Why did Jesus ask, “Where are the other nine?” They did what Jesus told them to do. Why criticize them for following directions? The nine lepers were Jews. After their complexion cleared and the priests gave them a clean bill of health, they were still children of Israel and could be restored to the community. But the Samaritan had a good news/bad news dilemma. He hadn’t gone far before he realized the leprosy was gone. He was blessed by a miracle, but he wondered, Why am I going to a Jewish priest? What was Jesus thinking? I can’t do that! The Samaritan’s leprosy was healed, but he was STILL an outcast, and he couldn’t go home and say a Jew healed him. Where could he go with his gratitude and praise except to Jesus?

When the gospels say that Jesus was headed for Jerusalem, it is code for his destiny on the cross. When the gospels mention Samaritans, it is also code. Jesus was routinely attacked by the religious professionals for the company he kept. He skipped Wednesday Bible study to eat and drink with unsavory sorts. He allowed a sleazy woman to worship at his feet and wipe them with her hair. He told a story about a man nearly beaten to death who was rescued and cared for by a despised, God-less, half-breed Samaritan—“after” the religious folks walked on by. A Samaritan leper whose heart was near exploding with gratitude falls before Jesus, profusely thanking him for giving back his life.

Jesus didn’t honor the circle built to keep insiders in and the outsiders out. He stepped outside the circle to show that if God’s people stopped caring about God’s will for the world, then God will find folks outside the family tree to do it. Jesus lifted up outsiders like the Samaritans who model the behavior that God’s elect have neglected.

Where can we find such faith today? It’s hard to find close to home. Contrary to what some still say, we do not live in a

Christian nation. It once was a nation that strived to live up to the high ideals it professed. It once had a voice of moral authority and understood the responsibilities of its greatness. But Jimmy Carter says, our values are endangered and we behave like an empire. Our elected officials espouse “Christian values” to achieve political ends—starting a war under false pretenses that so far has cost 3,800 American lives, over 600,000 Iraqi lives, and \$600 billion dollars. Imprisoning people without just cause and claiming that torture It’s hasn’t taken long for the most respected country in the world to become the most hated.

When we cease being grateful and no longer recognize our dependence on God, we live by the principle of entitlement. Why market lavish lifestyles that use precious resources that make the poor of the planet have to survive with less and less? We’re entitled.

Talk to Bill Pletcher about his experiences with medical mission in impoverished places in Latin America. He goes to do some good and bring relief to hurting people. He goes to embody the good news of Jesus to people who have so little of the things in this world. Bill goes outside his familiar, comfortable culture to minister to those who are outsiders to us. Talk to Bill and he will tell you stories of how these people with so little possess so much faith, gratitude and trust. Let him tell you about the spiritual truths they have taught him. He comes home tired, but he comes home with a stronger spirit.

During WW II, hundreds of thousands of prisoners of war were kept in camps across the United States. Jean Thackeray lived near one of the camps in Utah. Since so many men were in the service, there weren’t enough workers to tend the fields, so German POWs were brought to her father’s farm to thin sugar beets and cultivate potatoes. Her work was on a separate part of the farm, away from the prisoners. Then one night after the prisoners had finished their work and Jean was still in the field, she heard one of them crying.

She asked the guard what was wrong. The soldier had lost a pocket Bible that was a lifelong possession. It had fallen

somewhere in the field and he was heartbroken. Imagine that—a God-forsaken Nazi soldier with a Bible! Jean walked up and down the long rows until she found it. When the soldier came to work the next day, she returned it to him. Jean couldn't understand what he said to her, but it was clear he was grateful. He wanted to hug her, but the guard prevented him. His gratitude had to be expressed another way, so he found a nickel, carved a half-moon hole in it, and turned it into a necklace. It was such a little gift given in response to a little act of kindness shown to someone called, "the enemy."

On this day of affirming that the love of Jesus transcends the boundaries of denominations, races, classes and cultures, we must remember that the family of God is bigger than our little cluster gathered in this sanctuary. The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says that if we are not careful, in our efforts to convert others to Jesus, we might end up getting converted instead! Beware of the gratitude of strangers, outsiders, citizens on the other side of the border, the unclean, those who don't look, or think, or worship like we do.

Brueggemann goes on to say, "In our culture-bound American churches, our preferred strategy for evangelism is to invite people in with the winking assurance that 'everything' can remain the same."

Wouldn't it be something if we took some of the love and care we spend on each other, and spent it instead on people outside the circle? I wonder what could happen. I wonder what we might learn. I wonder how much more we might be in love with Jesus, and how much better we would be in recognizing him behind the faces of those we hadn't paid attention to before. I wonder.