

## LUKE 17, CROSSING COMFORT ZONES , OCTOBER 2019

In this morning's Gospel lesson, we meet up with Jesus and his disciples while traveling. Jesus is going somewhere he shouldn't be going, and he is taking his disciples along with him on this road trip, way out of their comfort zone. Travel has a tendency to do that. For example, when Phil and I traveled to Paris and London a few weeks ago, we crossed 7 time zones, but we crossed at least as many personal comfort zones. There were numerous reasons we hadn't traveled abroad since we went on a church choir tour in the 1990s to Germany, and most of them had to do with crossing boundaries and pushing out past our comfort zones. For us to make this trip meant that I had to overcome my fear of flying, and not only flying, but flying for 8 or 9 consecutive hours. It meant that Phil had to become comfortable with spending much more money than we usually would on a single trip at the same time he just stopped earning money as he retired. It meant making our own travel arrangements without being on a pre-set guided tour. It meant reserving and staying at an Airbnb for our first time ever, in a foreign country where we didn't speak the language. It meant figuring out public transportation, eluding pickpockets, understanding customs requirements, and a whole slew of other things that pushed us out of at least 7 comfort zones and forced us to cross boundaries and lines that we had previously established around ourselves as being safe and comfortable and better left uncrossed. And I am so grateful we did it, and it was so worth it, but it definitely was a stretch.

Jesus and his disciples don't have to cross any time zones, as they're traveling north to south. They don't have to deal with a language barrier or a different mode of transportation than usual. But they had, potentially, even greater boundaries to cross, even more significant comfort

zones to leave behind. This familiar story of the 10 lepers is generally viewed through the lens of the importance of giving thanks, which is certainly appropriate. But it is also a story about breaking down personal and cultural barriers, a story centered in theological geography and history. Recall that ancient Israel, at the time of King David in 1000 BC was relatively briefly a united nation of 12 tribes. It was still a small nation, long and thin in shape. When David's son, Solomon, died, the kingdom broke into two kingdoms, a northern kingdom of 10 former tribes, and a southern kingdom of only 2 of the former tribes; but the southern two tribes were large tribes and contained the all important capitol City of Jerusalem and the Temple. That northern kingdom fell first to foreign powers, and while the Hebrew religion continued to be practiced to varying degrees, there was a lot of intermarriage and the faith practices became more mixed. The southern kingdom also eventually fell prey to foreign powers, but more briefly, and there was a resurgence of Hebrew religiosity following their return from exile and the rebuilding of their temple in Jerusalem. Around 500 years after that exile in Babylon, the time of our text today, Israel was called Palestine, it was occupied by the Romans, and it was divided into 3 regions: south, middle, and north. The south region, called Judah, still included Jerusalem and the Temple, and this is where the better Jews lived, at least in their minds. Jesus was born and later died and was raised in Jerusalem. The northern region, called Galilee, is where Jesus actually lived and did the vast bulk of his ministry. This region, though intermarriage and less strict Jewish practices were observed, was nevertheless considered to be a dwelling place of adequate Jews, because they continued to recognize the importance of Jerusalem and the Temple in the southern region, even if they couldn't get down there very easily or often. The middle region, however, Samaria, was regarded with contempt and loathing both from the south and the

north. Not only had the Jews there intermarried and become lax in their adherence to Jewish laws, but they had the gall to create their own temple and capital within their own region, which just was not alright; they didn't respect the primacy of Jerusalem and the temple there. So, the Jews of the north and south regarded Samaritans as unclean, as not really even Jewish at all, although they looked Jewish to other people. Because of this, when pious Jews from Galilee wished to travel to Jerusalem to worship in the Temple, they went out of their way to avoid going through Samaria, they had no interaction with them, that was their comfort zone, and they liked it that way.

Jesus, then, is pushing that comfort zone out here, by traveling with his disciples first along the region between Samaria and Galilee—between the known and familiar and the unknown and feared—and he will later go directly into and through Samaria. He shouldn't have done that, and his disciples would have been very much outside of their comfort zone, because they loathed these people. Not only that, but wouldn't you know, they immediately encounter a band of lepers! Another group of unclean people to fear and hold in contempt, because their disfiguring illness and the contagion it involved caused others to conclude that God was punishing the lepers for past sins. Between Samaria and leprosy, the disciples must frankly be wishing they'd just stayed home in Galilee and not taken this road trip with Jesus.

I would suggest that so very often in so many ways, you and I are pushed outside of our comfort zones, find ourselves traveling into the unfamiliar or unknown, and feel afraid. The comfort zone can be geographical. Or it can involve race, or age, or gender identity or religion. It can be about health or safety or finances. All of us have comfort zones, possibly quite well

defined for some of us, and crossing the boundaries of those comfort zones is generally something we are reluctant to do. Sometimes we're forced to cross them, as circumstances happen. We become ill or lose a job or our marriage tanks, and suddenly we're in a place we have no desire to be. Sometimes we choose to cross them intentionally, because we recognize there's something beyond our comfort zone that we want or need to experience. Like traveling, or exploring a new vocation or relationship, or trying a new avenue of service, or taking up a new passion. However we land outside our comfort zone, isn't it good to know that Christ was and is all about pushing those boundaries out, exploring the regions beyond our usual comfort zones, discovering that God is, in fact, present everywhere and not just in our little self-created space? One commentary put it, "Whenever we draw a line and put other people or places on the other side of it, Jesus is on the other side of the line, too." We can't confine God to our comfort zone; there is nowhere God is not, and no one that God forsakes, even if they are people or places that we don't like or that scare us.

As I prepared for our trip, and believe me, all of those comfort zone crossings preyed on my mind literally for months in advance, I was encouraged by any number of God signs or wonders that seemed directed towards me for support. I have felt for years that God longed for me to spread my wings in some new directions, and I was bolstered by the kinds of providential encouragements I received. One was in the form of the morning devotion I use that was for Sept. 6, just a few days before we left. It involved a mother writing about her 8 year old son, who loved to swim, but wanted to withdraw from his first swim meet. The meet was happening in a different pool than the one he usually practiced in, and he just didn't feel comfortable. But as they sat and watched the older swimmers compete, her small son suddenly turned to her and said,

“If I want to swim like that some day, I’m going to have to just do it.” And his mom very wisely replied, “I’m sure of it. After all, when we’re out of our comfort zones, we’re still in God’s. There’s no perimeter on the Lord’s goodness and grace.” Well-- go Mom! Those were words her son needed to hear, and they were certainly words I needed to hear! Even if we’re outside of *our* comfort zone, we’re *not* outside of *God’s* comfort zone. Because there are no perimeters on God’s grace. There’s no where we can go, that God isn’t already present! And no matter how fearful or uncomfortable we may feel, God is steady and strong and able. I took that devotion to heart.

And maybe here’s another insight this Scripture lesson has to offer up to us. It’s really easy to exaggerate just how scary the world is outside of our particular zones of comfort. The less we have contact with other people and places, the easier it is to be convinced that our zone, alone, is the only safe and good place to be. Take these Jews and Samaritans for example. They all practiced essentially the same religion, they were descendants of the same united Kingdom of Israel, they were similarly oppressed by their Roman occupiers, they recognized the same sacred writings. Compared to all the nations and peoples around them, Jews and Samaritans were much the same; certainly more similar than different. But it didn’t seem that way to them. And we should understand that, because we live in a very polarized society, in which we sometimes feel we cannot possibly understand even our fellow Americans, for example, if they think and vote differently than we do; it’s like they inhabit a whole other nation, we think. This is true within Church circles as well. The Wisconsin Synod shares Lutheran identity with our own ELCA, but they seem altogether different from us to us---not only, for example, do they not ordain women; women don’t even read or speak in church worship. They will not share in Holy Communion

with us, because they consider us to be outside of the true Christian faith. I frankly feel like I might have more in common with atheists than with Wisconsin Synod members, but is that really true? Are they actually so different from us? To outsiders, wouldn't we appear to have more in common than we do in contention? We tend to exaggerate our differences when we're outside of our comfort zone.

The other exaggerated factor in this story is the fear of leprosy. Yes, leprosy is contagious, but not nearly to the degree that it justified the fear that surrounded it. Leprosy is only mildly contagious and only after repeated, long term, frequent exposure. There would have been more humane ways to deal with lepers than the way chosen, but fear shaped everyone's thinking in this regard. And so we, too, may exaggerate just how perilous and toxic the people and places beyond our comfort zone really are. And the less we know about them and the less we experience anyone or anything different from ourselves, the more easily we build up that exaggerated fear.

The way this story ends should bear out that truth. Because Jesus, not the least confined by boundaries of fear, race, geography, or illness, meets these lepers where they are at. Respectfully keeping their distance, as lepers were required to do, they called out for help, and Jesus heals them in an instant and tells them to go and certify their cure with the local priests; this will allow them to reenter society. Think of how much this must mean to them; not only are they healed of this hideous and disfiguring disease; they can have their lives back---their work, their families, their home, their community. Their hearts must be overflowing with gratitude as they hurry off to do as Jesus tells them, to certify their cure. Yet only one of the 10 decides to

take a detour and stop to offer thanks and praise to God before seeing the priests. And he was, as the Gospel writer and then Jesus point out, a Samaritan, of all people. One of those despised, unclean folks. Since they are at this point between Galilee and Samaria, the implication may be that this particular band of 10 lepers was made up of 9 Jews and 1 Samaritan, and *he* is the only one to thank God for his healing. Likewise, in another story from Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, in which only the Samaritan traveler helps to stop the man who was beat up and left for dead along the roadside. That story illustrates the love of neighbor; this story illustrates the love of God in returning thanks. In both of these instances, highlighting what matters most: love of God and neighbor--it is the person despised or feared who comes through, and who turns out to not be so bad and scary and different after all. This is no coincidence.

Jesus is making a point. There is no perimeter to God's grace, and the people on the other side of the line may not be as different from us or as scary as we make them out to be. But we won't know this if we never take any risks or disturb the complacency of our status quo! We only discover these truths for ourselves when we risk leaving the safety of our comfort zone. When we *have* to rely on God's grace in an unfamiliar or frightening place; when we actually *interact* with other people and places in order to grasp a common humanity. God does call us to do just that. And we can respond, knowing that we go nowhere that Christ is not already present, and that there are no perimeters to the grace of God. Amen.