

Luke 17:11-19

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

As mentioned in the bulletin announcements, my family and I are preparing for an extended trip to New Zealand. We leave in about six weeks, so we're very excited. But we will miss worshipping and being with you all here at Hope. We hope we can keep in touch while we're overseas, and we'll be back in about two years.

It's probably because we are preparing for a cross-cultural trip that I have found myself drawn to the traveling that Jesus does in the Gospel passage today. In Luke 17, we're told that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem and he passed through the region between Galilee and Samaria. I'm not sure exactly what that means: "the region between." I've looked at a map of first century Israel, and the two regions butt up against each other with nothing but a thin black line between them. Are we to suppose that there was a kind of buffer zone between the two territories that was neither Galilee nor Samaria but something different? What is the "region between?"

I know there are a number of experienced Boundary Waters canoers here in this congregation, so I'm sure some of you have also seen those white posts that mark the boundary between the US and Canada. It's very clear—the countries are divided from each other with a distinct border line. You can be in one country or another; there's no in-between. That's usually how we divide regions from one another, isn't it? There are clear lines of separation.

At our southern border, of course, many in our country would like to make the separation even more clear. They want to build a wall to protect the separation, to keep certain people out, but also to make it clear that there's a boundary. Ambiguity when it comes to separating nations can make people uncomfortable.

Have you ever been in one of those ambiguous, in-between places? There's no question that it can be awkward, but it can also provide great opportunities. For example, a few years ago, Kristen and I took a trip with some friends on the *Hurtigruten* Ferry in Norway, along the coast from Bergen to the Russian border. Upon boarding, we quickly noticed how many countries were represented there. Each announcement over the loudspeaker was given in three or four languages. When we sat down for meals we were likely to be joined by someone whose first language was Norwegian or German or French or Japanese. That could make conversation awkward. I remember trying mightily to hold a conversation in German with some table mates...and failing pretty miserably. Then, at another dinner, my friend used his very best Norwegian to order his meal and the waiter responded in perfect English, "I'm sorry. I'm from Spain, and I don't speak Norwegian." So, yeah, it was a little

awkward at times, but it was also a wonderful opportunity for learning and new relationships. Though we were traveling through Norway, there was a sense of being “in-between” nations.

So maybe it’s with this kind of metaphorical understanding that we should imagine where Jesus was when he encountered the ten lepers. It was more about who those lepers were and the circumstances of their lives than where they were geographically. Rather than just a place they were traveling through, those lepers lived permanently in a kind of in-between space. They were Galileans and Samaritans officially, but those labels no longer meant what they once did not that they found themselves in a leper’s colony. These individuals were ostracized from their communities because with oozing sores, their skin no longer functioned as the distinct boundary that it was expected to be, keeping the outside out and the inside in. They were therefore people who were feared and cast out. Regardless of the physical space in which they stood, they were people without a clear identity, living permanently in an in-between space.

A place like that might be a place that many of us would tend to avoid. It lacks clarity and familiar categories. It’s uncomfortable. In fact, I’d say that a big reason we typically construct such distinct boundaries when it comes to dividing people based on nationality, race, gender, maybe even religion, is because we have this assumption that in-between places are not only awkward but dangerous. They threaten our self-understanding and worldview.

And yet, the Gospels tell us that Jesus regularly chose to walk directly into such in-between places. He embraced them and the people who lived in them. Yes, he faced some danger in doing so. In today’s reading it was not only the possibility of contracting disease but also the question of how others would react when they found out that he treated Samaritans just like Galileans? Luke tips us off to the particular danger Jesus faced by reminding us that he’s on his way to Jerusalem, and any of us who have heard about Jesus knows what awaits him there. But those of us who know the Christian story also know that the reign of God is revealed especially in the in-between places of uncertainty and danger and transformation. Sharing a table with unlikely guests, forgiving debts and asking for forgiveness, engaging the powers on behalf of the oppressed, taking time to understand the experience of one stigmatized because of illness—these are all places where God shows up with healing and new life. So that in-between place at the border of Samaria and Galilee, a place of sorrow and exclusion, is precisely the kind of place we’d expect to find Jesus.

Perhaps some of you feel like in your own in-between place, maybe in terms of career or health or family or spiritual journey or anything else. For you, and for and for every other place in the world made vulnerable by uncertainty and pain, Christ promises to be with you and to accompany you with grace and healing.

At the end of this story, Jesus says to the one leper who returned, “Get up and go.” He is telling him that there is life for him to live. Even more, I think he’s saying, “since God’s story is still unfolding, get up and go be part of it.” Like Jesus, go and step across boundaries to share compassion and healing. Go and pay attention to the things that are truly worthy of gratitude and praise. Go and participate in the reign of God.

Those words are for us, too. It is part of our baptismal call. This is a congregation that has responded in many powerful ways to Christ’s call to get up and go into God’s future and be part of Christ’s work of healing and reconciliation. I am grateful to be on the journey with you.