

Generous Mercy

How the mercy of Jesus to the foreigner, outcast and sick is inclusive love

a sermon by The Rev. Andrew Downs

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Proper 23C | Luke 17:11-19

I'm going to guess that nobody here was thinking about that parable from two weeks ago about the rich guy suffering in Hades, wanting a drink of water. Just a little something to wet his lips, they must've been so dry in that place of torment. He tries to get Abraham to send Lazarus over to get him some water. What a weird parable. None of us were thinking about that this morning. Why would we; that was two weeks ago. But it was only a handful of verses ago in Luke.

It's a weird story. I don't expect you'd give it much mind today. But there's this thing that keeps nagging at me as we move on and we hit the road toward Jerusalem again. And it's that strange story of suffering and how this man still expected other people to do his bidding, even when he is desperate.

It's such a contrast with this morning's gospel of these ten people with leprosy who come to Jesus. And they stand away from him. Respecting his ritual purity. Respecting him enough not to get too close. They stand...like over there. And shout at him. Asking for mercy.

And I can't help but think about their pain and their sense of isolation. We don't know what they mean by mercy. But I know what I hear and what I would feel if I were them.

This is why Mother Theresa was so iconic. Because she showed mercy to people with leprosy. In the kind of mercy you would expect for people who have no contact with regular people. They just want to be touched.

And that's the thing that gets me about this story.

These people don't ask for healing,
but mercy.

"Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" What a cry! To call out to him, "have mercy on us!"

Master they call him. Not teacher, rabbi. Not friend or stranger. Master. Like they are slaves. Maybe like Paul, a slave to Christ. "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

Then Jesus sends them to be cleaned, to be ritually purified. There's no singular healing moment, and yet one of them notices that a healing has occurred. He turns and returns to Jesus. Praising GOD.

And by now you've gotta expect a twist. You have to. Something else here to grapple with. Of course. He's a Samaritan. Of course he is. The nine go for their ritual cleansing, like good faithful Jews. But the outsider, invited to do the same, doesn't. He's the one who goes back to Jesus.

This shouldn't surprise us. But it's still juicy, isn't it? Something that rings like a speck of trouble. A low rumble. A reminder to notice.

Notice that they are in the
borderlands.

Where Samaritans and Hebrews both dwell. To the north, not far from where all this started.

We have so long been enthralled by Jesus's teachings that we have lost track of

where we are. Chapter after chapter of teaching. Just not a whole lot of walking.

All the way back in chapters 9 and 10, Jesus is heading through the north, making his way into Jewish and Samaritan territory and sending his disciples and apostles out to serve these communities.

And it's from there we heard these great parables, including two of the most memorable: The Lost Sons and The Good Samaritan.

All this teaching about what it means to follow Jesus and the challenge given to the Pharisees. Stories of mercy and of conflict. Images of the kingdom in great beauty and some which inspire confusion.

But now we are snapped back into the world. And we see even though they struggled with the Samaritan people because Jesus's "face was set toward Jerusalem," they still wander the same territory. Echoes, perhaps, of an earlier people wandering for some time in the wilderness.

Now we get this encounter with people who aren't in the group or among the usual suspects. This isn't a story about Jesus with Pharisees or followers or disciples. In fact, all these people are absent from the story. It's just these people with leprosy.

Ten of them. Nine of which do what they're told. The other one a rebel.

But it's this rebel, this Samaritan who shows us the real truth of Jesus.

A truth which comes in three states of being.

Three states of being. Three actors. And three symbolic acts.

The first shows up at the beginning. When these ten people come looking for Jesus and he sends them to go find the priests. This is the first turn.

Ritual Purity

We know of the rites of purification so abstractly and with a bit of condescension.

Partly as Christians who say "Oh, we don't do that anymore!" so we don't worry about it. And partly from our post-enlightenment view that these were archaic rituals. Perhaps more superstitious than theological.

But there is a profound unity in the purity rituals between physical cleanliness and spiritual cleanliness. To go to a priest for ritual purity would be physically cleansing. And to people with a skin disease who were not supposed to have access to such mercy, that would be a redeeming experience. Spiritual and physical mercy.

Here the primary actor is the priest in the Temple and our symbolic act is washing.

So they start to leave. And one of them, the Samaritan, notices that something has changed. They aren't just going elsewhere to get ritually clean, they were somehow healed. Here's the second turn.

Healing

They came for mercy. And they not only got ritual cleansing, which is restoring of relationship to the community. But they are healed by Jesus, too. It's like walking in to buy a sandwich and getting the keys to shop. Way more than they asked for.

And in noticing, what does the Samaritan do? He turns back to Jesus. And then drops to his knees and praises GOD in a loud voice.

So the primary actor is Jesus and our symbolic act is turning.

Falling to Jesus's feet, the Samaritan thanks him. And it's here that we find out he's a Samaritan. Where Jesus references his outsider status. And here that we see how Jesus has done exactly as GOD has called us to do. He showed mercy to the foreigner.

{Seriously, scripture doesn't get better than this right here, does it? Who doesn't read this and then instantly think of the parable of the Good Samaritan? And then we think about it and it hits us: *What? Did Jesus just Good Samaritan the Samaritan?*

But our part of the story ends on the third turn.

Well

This man who, apparently doesn't need ritual cleansing after all, ignoring Jesus's instructions, who realizes he was healed, then turns back, throwing himself on the dirt to praise GOD and upon Jesus's feet to thank him, he alone among the ten, recognizes who Jesus is. And in the midst of that, Jesus declares that this man has been made well.

First ritual purity, then healing, and now well. The illness hasn't just been removed, but he is now well. It isn't just the absence of the bad, but the new presence of the good.

So the primary actor is GOD who made him well and our symbolic act is praising. In the dirt with a loud voice.

So there's this one last wrinkle that this story exposes about these three states; here in the borderlands of Jewish and Samaritan territory. In the space where half of the people believe they must go down to the Temple Mount to praise GOD. And the other half go over to a different mountain to praise GOD.

And so our three actors are all involved in this negotiation: the Temple priests, Jesus, and GOD.

The Samaritan doesn't go to the Temple priests. And he doesn't go to his people's mountain.

He turns to Jesus and he praises

GOD.

We take it for granted that we don't need to sacrifice at the Temple in Jerusalem. The nature of that thinking is so foreign to us now. Of course we just need to turn to Jesus wherever we are. Especially when we're in the borderlands. Lost and confused and begging for mercy.

But the thinking isn't that foreign. For we do love our institution and our practice. We love our beautiful church and our beloved tradition. We have our own versions of ritual purity and obsess over doing things "right".

It is no mere coincidence that the man who turns is a Samaritan living in the borderlands. For it is those on the margins who most need Jesus's mercy.

At a time when foreigners are maligned and the homeless are treated with contempt (the city, our city, Terre Haute, has taken away park benches for goodness sake); the poor are scolded and our governor won't even pardon a man wrongfully convicted, exonerated, and declared innocent; we're all in need of GOD's mercy.

Our cries for mercy need to be louder.

And then, after we cry out and we hear the good news from Jesus, who tells us to go out and love our world and everybody and everything in it, what do we do then? Do we head back to church? Or do we turn to Christ with new understanding that we are already healed? The generous gift GOD has already given us.

How do we respond to GOD's generosity? That we come looking for mercy, and yet we are not only given the opportunity to be clean, but healed?

A far cry from that pathetic man from the parable. This Good Samaritan made well! Cries of mercy turn to cries of praise and thanksgiving!

Knees in the dirt, thankful for GOD's generosity. Made well.