

October 9, 2016

Loving Kindness

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Luke 17:11-19

First Parish Church, UCC, Brunswick, ME

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Intro to scriptures:

This morning we are going to hear from 3 different Biblical texts. Together these passages point us past our deep human wants and needs toward the kindness that *God in Christ* extends to all.

In Jeremiah we hear the prophet direct the exiles (living in Babylon) *to live their lives in this foreign place by making themselves at home* and by working to support the community where they are living. The prophet instructs them to remember God's promise - *that God would one day send them home to Jerusalem*. In this way, the source tells our exiled ancestors in faith to keep their focus on God.

In 2 Timothy the Apostle Paul points his audience toward Christ-centered lives. He goes on to encourage them to praise God by presenting themselves to God as they strive to do their best. (*Easier said than done. I mean really, when was the last time you praised God by presenting yourself to God as you worked to do your best??? Come on - who's done it? Oh good, I'm in the right place.*) Living a FAITH-filled life of praise and embracing the Word of God as a guide for our lives is a lot of work. In this second letter, we hear the voice of Paul admonishing Timothy to *study the Word* (v. 15). As a faith-leader, Timothy no doubt had to deal with some of the same issues that clergy are dealing with today (in *OTHER* churches, certainly not this one). Timothy probably had followers arguing and gossiping about trivial stuff and causing confusion and discord; there may have been those within the congregation who were teaching a different gospel; or weary believers who had lost sight of God's direction in their lives (v. 8, 16-18). But in the midst of all of this Paul realized the importance of preparing for the journey - not just for Timothy, but for those who would come after him as well.

So in the first scripture, we hear the voice of one who reminds us of *God's promise to redeem the people of God*. In the second, Paul is instructing Timothy to immerse himself in the Word and praise of God. In the third, we hear something that on the surface seems wholly different. We hear a healing story.

Within our Gospel text, we encounter Christ as he grants a request for a collective healing. In one fell-swoop Jesus heals not 1 but 10 lepers. One of the ten - a Samaritan leper, outcast of the outcasts - is healed and having recognized the healing for the gift that it was, took the time to praise God's work through Jesus - and not with a simple "thank you" but with fervor. So what is the common thread? In all of these passages there is repetitive a petition to use our voices, our bodies and our whole lives to praise God *with energy, a sense of vitality, passion, and purpose*. Moreover, in each of these

texts, as in our live, *the God that was, and is, and ever shall be* is **present** and is to be recognized. Please listen for the Word of God.

When I thought about a sermon title for today, I considered calling it “There's no cure for being a Samaritan. Or is there?” But that isn't really in keeping with our Micah text. So, as we continue to listen for God's voices with the backdrop offered to us in Micah 6:8 - “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God,” we have to ask what do today's scriptures have to do with the act of Loving Kindness?

How can we, as followers of the living Christ, “act justly, love kindness and walk humbly with your God in this crazy world that we live in?” Ironically, one of the ways that humans - and we, as human Christians - have (throughout our history) done this is through the creation of barriers, boundaries and borders. Anthropologically speaking, barriers, boundaries and borders are necessary evils. They help us create structure and provide a framework that has allows humans to evolve, survive and even thrive. As is the case within our wider culture, these boundaries, borders and barriers have even made their way into religious and secure laws.

There is a quote by the famous poet, theologian and all-around thinker “Anonymous” in which he/she/they said “Man made borders *not to limit himself*, but to have something to cross.” And as the mother of 3 boys with a Celtic heritage I “get it.” In fact, that quote brings to mind, long childhood trips during a much simpler time - a time before the days when *adolescent backseat sibling rivalry* was mediated by electronic devices; back when families played the alphabet game as they traveled across these United States in station wagons; when one child in the rear-facing backseat could be heard saying to her much older sibling “That crack, right there, (pointing to a seam in the vinyl seat) is THE LINE. You can't cross it or you're dead.” (*You could say things like that, back then.*) Well, you can imagine how that scene played itself out... “Mom, he crossed the line. He's on my side...” Boundaries, borders, barriers are meant to be crossed and doing so can leave us with a feeling of accomplishment or achievement.

Beyond our love of crossing them and their anthropological significance, (in real life) boundaries, borders and barriers are scary places, places of tension and danger, where people on both sides often feel a sense of fear or vulnerability. I have a friend who grew up on the border between North Korea and South Korea and she often speaks of the almost tangible sense of fear and doom that hangs over her village like a shroud. But anyone who has ever crossed an armed border or watched the evening news (for that matter) understands that borders, boundaries and barriers are not places of sanctuary. They are places of tension that create (for all involved) - an *us and them* dynamic.

Interestingly enough that is often where we encounter the Holy - both in the Bible and in our own lives. The God of our Exilic ancestors in faith, the God of early followers of Jesus, the God that we worship here today is with us - extending and modeling kindness in an untold number of ways.

In our Gospel text (alongside Jesus) we encounter “*them*” - the ten lepers - stationed “*over there*” - across one of those invisible boundaries, borders, barriers. Instead of approaching, the lepers call out to Jesus across *that* space. They are, of course, maintaining a reasonable distance as prescribed by the Law (meaning Jewish Law) because they have been deemed to be unclean - unfit to participate fully within the community.

Have you ever been a “them?”

I’m reminded of countless women who were “let go” by their employers learned that they were pregnant;

Or the divorcee’ who was shunned by the church;

Or of AIDS patients in the early 80’s, when few people wanted to be in the same room with a infected person - much less touch them;

Or of the homeless person standing at the stoplight;

Or the LGBTQ individual who was unable to to work with children in the church or in schools because - well - you know, they might corrupt them.

Have you ever been a “them” - *just a stone’s throw from blessing?*

The lepers, were *good lepers*, if there were such a thing. Being well verse in social, cultural and religious norms they knew better than to approach Jesus. But I wonder who they were before there affliction. Were they regular people with regular jobs? Were they bankers, lawyers, fishermen, bakers, teachers, doctors, plumbers (oh wait, probably not plumbers)? Then again, does it matter? I mean, with a disease like leprosy what were the chances that they would EVER be anything other than an outcast?

Regardless, Jesus crosses the border between Galilee and Samaria and encounters this disparate group of people, albeit from a slight distance, and (unlike so many of the other healing stories in the Bible) he doesn’t actually touch them, but his words - or his intention - or his mere presence somehow makes them well.

With a simple command, he sends them where? (Pause) To the priests - so they can be deemed clean and reclaim their lives. Eager to return to their unnamed lives as bankers, lawyers, fisherfolk, bakers, teachers, doctors and perhaps not plumbers, 9 of them hurry off to show themselves to the priest, as Jesus instructed them. Only then could they obtain the necessary documentation that would allow them to re-enter society. In this way the lepers received blessing upon blessing - being physical healed and also restored to their previous social standing.

But one - and there is always one, isn’t there? The least likely one, no less - not our Good Samaritan from earlier in Luke (chap. 10) but your average no good, unclean leper-type Samaritan, does what? He *turns around*.

Yes! Instead of following the crowd he turns back, throws himself at Jesus, praises God and thanks Jesus profusely. Beside himself with gratitude he prostrates himself at Jesus' feet. **Awkward!**

Well - meanwhile, back at the Temple, our remaining 9 *faithful* Jewish lepers are obediently doing exactly what they were instructed and expected to do. In her weekly reflection on this passage, Kate Huey says that while all of this was unfolding "Jesus wonders where they are, but we know, and we assume he knows, that they're at the Temple, getting their certificates so they can go back to their lives, the sooner the better." But who can blame them? We can no more blame Jeremiah's audience for hungering for a piece of good news than we can admonish the 9 lepers for simply wanting to resume their pre-contaminated lives. Let's face it, being an US is a place of privilege.

Keeping in mind that the Temple would not be a place he'd be welcome even if he was cured of his leprosy - the Samaritan, the outsider amongst the outsiders, the "them, even amongst the THEM" - lacking any cure for his Samaritan-ness, with no need for a certificate of purity - was so seized with joy at Jesus's kindness that he turns back and gives thanks.

You know when I heard this story as a child, I heard it as a lesson in giving thanks - that the Samaritan was ultimately (like the guy who had gotten beaten up in chapter 10) a GOOD Samaritan because he knew how to say *thank you*. But it is so much more than that. Sure, it is a story that underscores the importance of gratitude, but it is also a story about who's in and who's out; a story in which the *spirit of the law* trumps the letter of the law; and a story that demonstrates - yet again - the kindness of God and the gratitude and kindness that healing evokes.

So who are the "us's" and who are the "them's?" Well, as your Minister of Visitation I can tell you that it's easy to become a "them." It's easy to go from worshipping in the pews this week to **NOT**. All it takes is a simple fall, a diagnosis, a change in your health or mental health, or a surgical procedure (that doesn't go quite like you planned) - and before you know it getting to church on Sunday morning becomes work - and I am not talking about *I stayed out too late on Saturday night so getting up this morning on this rain Sunday morning and going to church is work*, I mean two hours worth of deliberate work - waking up, washing up, getting dressed, having breakfast, somehow transporting yourself to the church and getting from a vehicle into the sanctuary. *Whoosh* - it makes me tired just thinking about it!

And you might be sitting there telling yourself, "Oh, that would never happen to me," but look around you. Ask yourself, who used to sit in that pew - (*point*) right over there? Gosh, what was her name? I can remember her face, but what WAS her name??? *Oh yes, it was Jane!* You might even remember seeing Jane's name on a prayer list - or heard someone saying she had been moved to a rehab facility - you might even say a quick "yes" of prayer for Jane when you hear her name in during the pastoral prayer.

But it never really occurs to you to visit her or send her a card - to reach out with a word of kindness across that invisible barrier that was so effortlessly created.

If you don't have the time to visit Jane, and if words on paper aren't your thing, (and I realize I may be stepping into something but here goes) I suppose you could also get behind the effort to make some significant changes to our worship space - changes that would allow Jane to come back and participate fully in the worship life of our church.

Old churches - beautiful OLD churches - all around the global struggle to be *places of welcome for those who are less mobile*. So when I first arrived here in last Spring I was pleased to see that you all had invested in ramps and parking that allow for greater accessibility - and I was even more excited to see that someone had the foresight to begin the process of making the worship space more functional and more accessible. I mean, after all, we want to share the Word of God with the WORLD not become a well-appointed museum for the agile, right?

But I digress. (Pause) Friends, by the grace of God you may be an "us" today, but you could just as easily become a "them" tomorrow. Armed with that knowledge, do you hear this story any differently? The Samaritan in this story was an outsider among outsiders, a *"them" among thems and to the crowd that followed Jesus*, but with a few kind words Christ sets him free. With a few words Jesus crossed the borders, barriers, boundaries that separated them and freed this man from that which kept him from being fully human in his world - and the Samaritan responded to **this act of kindness** with gratitude and love, and I can only imagine that that kindness shaped him in such a way that went on to share it with the world.

The late John F. Kennedy, once said "As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them." May each of us find a way to embody the love that God has extended to us in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Benediction:

In the words of Mother Theresa:

Not all of us can do great things,
but we can do **small** things with **great love**.

Friends, as you this place today
may you go in great love, to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.
This day and always. Amen.