

Jesus is traveling on the border again, the margins between the known and the unknown the familiar and the unfamiliar. The Greek word for foreigner used here is the root word for our word “genes” and for genesis. The foreigner is so different that she has different ‘genes’; he has a different ‘genesis’ or origin.

This little story shows us a picture of someone **thoroughly foreign** to Jesus and his little band of Jews. They were foreign because Samaritans were a reminder of the split that happened when the Babylonians conquered the land, hauled 3/4<sup>th</sup> of the people off to slavery, leaving 1/4<sup>th</sup> behind to survive as best they could. When the exiles returned from Babylon after living there for 100s of years, they claimed to bring with them the true faith, the faith as written in the writings of what we know as the old testament. They returned to their homeland to find those who had remained had adapted to the surrounding culture, one that the ‘true believers’ thought was pagan. But, the Samaritans probably thought the **same** thing about the strangers returning from the east who had lived so long in the midst of a different dominant culture, with a different religion.

It would be like all of us with Swedish or Norwegian heritage returning to the land of our great grandparents. We may have some customs or favorite foods that remind us of our heritage. But, those foods and customs are not necessarily still favorites in the old country. The people who **stayed** behind in those countries have **not** been frozen in time. They’ve moved on as have we. Each of us would look askance at the other; wondering about each other’s traditions and beliefs. I once heard a foreign exchange student from Norway say that her host family here in the U.S. was more Norwegian than her family who had always lived in Norway. We may have been the same family at one time, but after much time and distance we’re so different we can hardly find any common ground. That was the situation between the Jews and the Samaritans. They didn’t trust each other. They didn’t understand each other. They ate different foods, cherished different traditions. For Jesus’ disciples it was unimaginable that there could be a good, or trustworthy or decent Samaritan, not because they were any different from themselves. But, because time, and circumstance had created differences in external features making them think there were real differences that **didn’t actually** exist.

So Jesus travels in this borderland between the known and the unknown – with the claim of the right religion a matter of perspective. In this case, which religion is ‘right’ depends upon whether your family was dragged off to slavery or was left behind to survive in a destroyed, war-ravaged country.

Some people describe such border lands as ‘thin places’ places where the veil between heaven and earth; between God and human gets very thin; even the distinction between holy and unholy, sacred and profane are blurred. Jesus often chose these places to travel, to bring healing, encountering the others who travel in the in-between places. In these thin places surprising things can happen.

In this borderland Jesus encounters 10 men with a skin disease that required them to keep their distance from everyone else. They were supposed to call out from afar “unclean”, “unclean” so

that no one would accidentally come in contact with them and they would be blamed for corrupting another person. So, from a distance, Jesus instructs them to go to the priests and show themselves, healed of the skin disease. Nine of them do just that but one returns and throws himself at Jesus' feet and gives thanks.

Much has been said about the importance of gratitude from this brief story about Jesus. And we know gratitude is important. Now we have a lot of research that points to all the benefits of living a grateful life: health benefits, relationship benefits; even longer lives. But, if all Jesus is saying is "Be Grateful" he didn't need to drag in the foreign Samaritan to do it. He didn't need to travel the borderlands. There are simpler stories that could have made that point.

I think Jesus is asking us to look for goodness, even faithfulness in unexpected places. Maybe Jesus is saying that **not only** the people we call family, or the ones we're comfortable with, those who are like us are good, are capable of being grateful, or joyful, or humble, or angry, all of the emotions we find 'normal' when they're expressed by someone from our own group?

I must admit that my thinking about this passage was captivated by a question I read early in the week. This one question made me rethink this short story and wonder at how our Biblical stories so often reflect **ourselves** more than God.

The question asked, paraphrasing verse 17, "The other nine, where are they?" Then the writer went on to say, "What a wonderful question? Where did they go? With whom did they reunite to celebrate the amazing healing that God had worked in them?" "What if we hear Jesus speaking with a sense of **wonder** instead of with an angry voice?"

We never want to twist scripture to fit our agenda, but I think it's possible that this particular scripture has a **history** of being twisted.

Let's look at it more closely. Everyone in this story has done everything right, they've acted according to their **own** character and they've followed the **rules of the culture** they lived in.

The lepers were in that borderland where they were **forced** to live to maintain the purity sensibilities of the masses of people. They obeyed the law that said they must keep their distance from those who were healthy. If anyone got too near, they were supposed to call out a warning and they **did** just that.

When Jesus healed them, he instructed them to go show themselves to the priests as was required by law so that everyone would know that they had been healed; they were no longer a threat to the community; they could be accepted back into regular life with their family and friends. They could again work and marry and live.

If they continued to act according to their character, which they **had** up until that point in the story, then they **would have followed** Jesus' instruction to go show themselves to the priest at the

temple. They didn't come back to thank Jesus because they were doing **what Jesus told them to do**. After that, acting according to the custom of their culture they would have given thanks **at the temple**. That's where faithful Jews went to give thanks. Then, who knows what they would have done: found their families? Hugged and kissed them? Danced for joy? Joined in a celebration feast?

And the one who was **not** a Jew would also have done what was in keeping with **his** character. He would **not** have followed Jesus command to show himself to the priests at the temple, because that was not HIS temple. That was not his faith. He returned to thank the one **most directly** involved in his healing. He was a foreigner to Jesus but in this borderland, Jesus had met him and saw that he too was valuable, that he was worthy of being restored to life and so he returned to throw himself at Jesus feet in thanks! He acted in keeping with his character and what his culture expected of him at that time in that place.

So, what about Jesus? Jesus ventures into that borderland as he so often did and whenever he did he brought healing or acceptance. He brought love, God's love, God's all-encompassing love for all people. Time and time again, he spoke out against the religious authorities who were oppressing the people and he spoke out against the dominating power that was making all their lives miserable. Jesus consistently act and speaks with **God's** love for **all** people, not condoning the oppressive acts, but counseling people how to live to overcome that oppression with love.

Jesus commands the 10 afflicted with skin disease to "Go, show themselves to the priests." So, why do we think it reasonable that now, after they have done what he told them to do that he would condemn them with an "angry voice" rather than expressing **amazement and curiosity**, wondering where they were now and what kind of rejoicing and reunion they were now enjoying?

It's an old saying that we don't read the Bible. The Bible **reads us**! Well, I think our interpretation of this passage as one of Jesus angrily denouncing the 9 people who did not return, reveals more about **us** than it does about Jesus. It reveals our tendency to think that God is **like** us, only more so; more powerful, more everything; even more judgmental.

So, maybe the writer of this passage that we know as Luke was a little guilty of that too. Maybe the translators of the original Greek were guilty of that at times as well. Modern commentators have certainly taken this approach although many are beginning to question the lens through which we have seen Jesus' words. And of course, we have to ask how **we** have been guilty of that?

I wonder what other passages we have been hearing through the voice of our **own** tendencies to be angry, judgmental, or self-serving? What would happen if **as** we read the Bible we keep in mind the **character** of **God** we know to be loving, compassionate and caring for all people? How would it change how we hear the words and how they might affect our lives and the lives of those we touch in the world?

All of this leads me to say, I invite you and encourage you and I **pray** that you will all consider joining one of our Bible Studies that begin this week. Reading the Bible together is our privilege and our responsibility as followers of Jesus. We need to read it and we need to read it **together** so that it continues to **read us**, showing us the **truth** of ourselves, rather than our tendency, especially when we read it alone to read **into it** our own very human, very natural biases.

In a couple of weeks, we're going to celebrate the anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, the foundation of the Lutheran denomination of which we are a part. One of the founding pillars of the reformation was that **every single** person needed to read the Bible for themselves **with** other people of faith. They were not to leave it to the clergy but needed to be able to read it and understand it, with the **help** of the clergy. Only when everyone reads it together is there any chance that we are not just fooling ourselves, reading the Bible through the lens of our **own** agendas instead of letting it read us, revealing not only **ourselves but the God** whose love is eternal for all people and all creation.

The good news is that God **is** love and God's grace and compassion and restoration and hope is for ALL people and the inspired word of God, in the Bible but especially in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh reveals God's true character. Amen.

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