

The Grateful Samaritan
The Rev. Amy Spagna
October 9, 2022 – Pentecost 19C
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Psalm 66:1-11; Luke 17:11-19

I've been sifting through my music library lately. Part of that process has been rediscovering some of what's in there, and it's gotten me thinking about what a soundtrack for this week's set of readings might include. The *Jubilate* from the canticles that Herbert Howells wrote for King's College, Cambridge is definitely on the list, as it begins with the same command to be joyful in God as today's psalm does. Another thing on the list to include is the Mumford and Sons song "Hopeless Wanderer." It's about the struggles of being in relationship, and could easily have been written either by the recipients of Jeremiah's letter or the people Jesus meets along the side of the road. The first verse begins:

You heard my voice, I came out of the woods by choice

Shelter also gave their shade

But in the dark I have no name

So leave that click in my head

And I will remember the words that you said

Left a clouded mind and a heavy heart

But I am sure we could see a new start¹

That new start is exactly what's on offer for the 10 lepers whose disease Jesus cures in today's gospel reading. Luke clues us in right away that this story is at least partially about dealing with social pariahs. First of all, this village is smack in the middle

¹ Mumford and Sons, "Hopeless Wanderer." *Babel*. Glassnote Entertainment Group LLC CD GLS-0131-02. 2012.

of the no-man's land between the borders of Samaria and Galilee – a region which most pilgrims headed to Jerusalem would avoid if at all possible. Jews at that time considered Samaritans to be "THOSE PEOPLE," so anyone of that ethnicity was automatically labeled as both suspect and unsavory. Equally as icky and outcast were people who had any of the myriad of skin disorders categorized as leprosy. They were considered to be contagious in more ways than one, so they had to socially distance AND warn off anyone who came close to them.

What's truly remarkable here is that Jesus doesn't shrink back from them or run away when they approach him. He has mercy on them, just as they ask for. And then, one of them, who was identified as a Samaritan, turns back and says, "Thank you." Jesus' actions, and the response to them, highlight three things: one is the healing itself. The second is the marginalized people it involves. And the third is the place of gratitude as a response to God's actions. All of these things point in the direction of ongoing growth and change being necessary parts of a life of faith, and of what's required to receive those gifts humbly.

Leprosy, or Hansen's disease, is caused by a slow moving bacterial infection. The World Health Organization notes that it can damage skin, nerves in the hands and feet, upper respiratory tract, and eyes. The initial symptoms include irritated, flaky, and discolored skin – likely inclusive of the skin issues which are described at some length in a number of ancient sources, including the Old Testament. The bacteria themselves are contagious, and they spread like any other airborne illness. Nowadays, it's curable with medication, but back in Jesus' day, it wasn't.² Then, the cure, as prescribed in

² "Leprosy Fact Sheet." <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/leprosy> [accessed October 5, 2022].

Leviticus 19, was first to separate oneself from the community for at least seven days. Then the infected person was to go to not a dermatologist but to one of the priests, who would examine the skin and pronounce the person "clean" – and then, instruct them to go and do laundry.

It's definitely a weird practice by our standards – and I for one am glad that basic dermatology is no longer part of the job description – but not so much for this group of villagers. Luke uses them to further the key theme that "Jesus is for everyone." It really isn't all that surprising, at this point in the narrative. That Jesus is even talking to one of THOSE people, much less showing them mercy, is very much in character. He's already made a habit of eating with sinners and tax collectors, and showing favor to the marginalized. And, in telling the Parable of the Good Samaritan, back in Chapter 10, he puts a Samaritan front and center as "not only the object of neighborly love... [but] also the exemplary subject of neighborly love... [and] the Samaritan leper is the subject of Godly love."³

It would have been shocking enough to any Jewish onlooker that Jesus healed a Samaritan in the first place. What's even more shocking is that this one, alone out of the ten lepers, turns around and says thanks. That kind of behavior just wasn't expected from one of THOSE people, and it raises the question: Are the other nine just plain rude? Maybe. Are their actions a mark of privilege? Also maybe. They likely expected the priests would pronounce them "clean" and never give a second thought to what Jesus had done for them. Their privileged ways of thinking and being and doing may

³ Ira Brent Driggers, "Commentary on Luke 17:11-19." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-28-3/commentary-on-luke-1711-19-4> [accessed October 3, 2022].

well have caused them to believe that this was just what was rightfully theirs anyway, and that they deserved to be able to resume life as usual.

The entitlement piece is nothing new. Nor is the Samaritan's decided change in attitude in response to Jesus showing him mercy. I saw this same kind of thing every so often when I served at a parish in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania which housed a large feeding ministry. The elected officials in the city had all but declared many of the regular Soup Kitchen guests unclean because they were homeless, or suffering from severe mental illness, or couldn't find a job which paid enough for them to afford both decent housing and enough food. Some folks would stand in line and accept their lunches grudgingly. Some refused to follow the rules altogether and would find themselves being asked to leave. Most of them were happy just to be in a place where they were treated with dignity, and they never failed to thank the staff and volunteers for their hard work. Joey, a man who'd been coming to the Soup Kitchen for years, was one of the ones who made a point of expressing his gratitude. One day, when he'd been particularly frustrated by the behavior of some of the other guests, Joey made a point of stopping to talk to me on his way out. He more or less put it this way: *How they take all this for granted just makes me angry. You see, I was drinking and getting into all sorts of other bad stuff when I first came here. The people here saved me, and they keep on saving me despite how I still get into trouble sometimes. Anyone who doesn't bother to say thank you, or who takes everything you guys try to do for granted, just doesn't get it.*

Joey – and the healed Samaritan – are powerful reminders of God's grace in action. It knows no bounds. And neither does the human capacity to look at it and say, "WOW." One of the truths in that is simply God does not intend us to be the hopeless

wanderers who can never go home. Even when things seem hopeless, when we're down and out and have to ask for help, God always shows up and throws us a lifeline, whether that's in the form of a hot meal and a community dedicated to treating everyone with kindness and respect, or the literal removal of the thing that's keeping us down. And God's action is what allows us to turn back in God's direction as a people who have been changed enough to recognize and give thanks for all that we have. It's only then that we can remind one another that, to paraphrase Psalm 66, it is God who holds our souls in life, and will not allow our feet to slip.