

Sermon 10.9.16

Pastor Josh Ferris

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

2 Kings 5:1-15c | 2 Timothy 2:8-15 | **Luke 17:11-19**

Today's service is all about *why*. *Why* we say and do the things that we say and do in worship. This question – *why* – is one that moms and dads all know. It's the question our children ask to learn about the world. *Why?* It's the question scientists ask to understand. *Why?* It's the question we all ask when we see tragedy and evil in the world. *Why?* It's a good question. '*Why?*' gets at motive and reason and purpose, it asks for explanation and meaning and intention. And this question – *why* – can help us understand our Gospel reading this morning, because it is full of details and layers that beg for explanation and meaning.

Why? Why does the geographical location of today's reading matter? Why do these lepers keep their distance? Why did they cry out to Jesus for mercy? Why did Jesus tell them to go and show themselves to the priests? Why did one turn back to give thanks? Why is it a big deal that he was a Samaritan? And why does this story matter, to us, today?

That's a lot of questions, so we'll take them one at a time.

Why? So that we can hear the Good News this morning.

At the beginning of this story, we read that while Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem he was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. And this matters. ***Why?*** Because there really wasn't a region between Samaria and Galilee. It's not like the area between Philly and that city whose team we beat really badly a few weeks ago – what's it called? Oh yea! Pittsburgh! – with hundreds of miles of central Pennsylvania in-between. Samaria and Galilee

were right next to each other. They shared a border. So Jesus is walking through a borderland, and it's filled with people who lived on the margins of society, looking for a place to belong.

And that's where Jesus encountered the ultimate borderland-dwellers: lepers. The story tells us that ten lepers approached Jesus, but they also kept their distance, yelling to him. **Why?** Why did the lepers keep their distance? Because they had to.

Now when we picture lepers, most of us picture someone suffering from Hansen's Disease, their skin rotting or falling off. But in biblical times, leprosy was used to refer to any number of skin diseases. If you had a boil, or a rash, or a burn, or a recurring itch, or a weird mole, or even an ingrown hair, you could be labelled a leper.

In Leviticus chapter 13 – which is really thrilling reading – there are long, complex instructions for how priests could determine if someone was a leper or not. Back in ancient times there was a lot of fear that diseases would spread, especially skin diseases. That's why they burned clothes and tore down houses if they were occupied by people who became lepers. The law said that if someone was declared to be a leper, they “shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall...cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ He shall live alone; his dwelling place shall be outside the camp.” (vs. 45-46)

This means that if you were declared to be a leper, everything changed. Immediately. You had to leave your home and family to go live by yourself. You couldn't see your friends and loved ones any more. You couldn't go to the market to get food. You couldn't be near people, and if anyone approached, you had to shout *unclean!* so they would know. That is why the lepers kept their distance from Jesus. It's why they kept their distance from everyone. I can't imagine a more lonely and awful life. They were scared and alone, outcasts in every way.

And so they cried out to Jesus for mercy. **Why?** On one hand it's obvious – they wanted relief. They wanted their lives back. But on the other hand, they're making an incredible statement of faith. When they called out to Jesus, they called him by name. They called him 'Master.' Somehow, even separated from all of society, ostracized from everyone, they had still heard about Jesus. And when they saw him on the road, they recognized Jesus for who he truly was: the Master, the Savior, the Son of God.

They saw Jesus and realized they were in the presence of God. While the powerful saw only a peasant, it was poor fisherman that learned who Jesus was. While religious leaders saw only an upstart who challenged their power, it was sinners and tax collectors who realized who Jesus was and came to follow and worship. While he was rejected by many, Jesus was recognized by ten lepers as the one with the power to heal them and make them well.

In response to the lepers crying out him for mercy, Jesus did a funny thing. He told them to go and show themselves to the priests. **Why?** Because only a priest who could declare a leper clean. A leper needed to prove that they were healed so they could get their lives back.

As these ten lepers went to go find a priest, they were overjoyed to discover that they were healed. Nine of them continued on as Jesus had told them, but one of them turned back, praising God. He found Jesus, fell down at his feet, and gave thanks. **Why?** Because that's the appropriate response when God does something amazing in our lives: to praise and give thanks. Giving thanks to God makes our faith complete, and helps us not just to recognize the blessings in life for what they are, but also to recognize *who* they come from. This man realized there was plenty of time to go and show himself to the priest, but right now he had to give thanks to the one who had healed him and made him whole.

Gratitude is part of our faith. It's a way to practice our faith. If you want to deepen your relationship with God, to become more aware of how God is at work in your life and in this world, then gratitude is a great place to start. Set aside just a few minutes every night to consider what you're grateful for. Over this next week, decide to give God thanks for every goodness and blessing that you encounter. You'll find that your faith is strengthened, that your gratitude grows, that after a while thanksgiving simply becomes a way of life.

This man turned back to give thanks, and that's when we learn something interesting. Both the narrator and Jesus point out that he was a foreigner, a Samaritan. And this is a big deal. **Why?** Well, Jewish people considered Samaritans not just to be foreigners, but to be particularly dirty, unclean, shameful people. Hundreds of years earlier, the kingdom of Israel had split into two. The southern kingdom was called 'Judah' and kept their capital in Jerusalem. The northern kingdom became known as 'Israel' and put their capital in Samaria. In 722 BCE, the Assyrian Empire conquered and destroyed the northern kingdom. They sent the conquered Israelites into exile to every corner of the known world, and they brought Gentile foreigners from all across the earth to come and live in northern Israel.

As a result, those Israelites who were left in the north mingled and intermarried with these foreigners who had been sent to live among them. And for the Jewish people in the southern kingdom of Judah, these northerners became known as 'Samaritans,' and they were considered dirty traitors who abandoned the faith. They were despised and looked down upon, like some distant cousins who had disgraced and shamed the family.

And yet here a Samaritan is, giving thanks and serving as an example of faith. Out of all ten lepers, it's the foreigner who Jesus praises and who shows us how to be faithful.

So here's my last **why** question: **why** does this story matter, to us, today?

It matters because it shows that Jesus is not afraid of borderlands or dark places, and he doesn't shy away from broken or overlooked people. Whatever darkness you have inside of you, whatever parts of your life you want to hide away, no matter who you are, you are not too broken or unclean for God. And just as importantly, no matter what others have said about you, no matter how marginalized or unimportant or invisible you've been made to feel, God sees you and cares for you. Jesus came for broken and imperfect and ignored and overlooked people. He continues to seek them out. He continues to hear their cries for mercy. He continues to welcome them back into community, where they are cared for. And he continues to heal the broken, hurt, and wounded places in our lives.

This story matters because it proclaims that the Good News of God's love and grace in Jesus is for all people, no matter who they are, no matter their sexual orientation, or their physical abilities, no matter their power or status, or their ethnicity or nation of origin. People are not objects, to be used or taken advantage of. Each and every person is God's child, created with dignity and value and worth. And in response to some of the most disgusting comments we've ever heard making the news this week, we have to teach this to our children and our sons and our daughters, we have to use our voices to proclaim that exploiting and using others, that dehumanizing and objectifying and assaulting others is sinful and wrong, and can never be tolerated or accepted, much less celebrated.

This story matters because it shows us that sometimes the most unlikely people are the ones who see things most clearly, who recognize the presence of Jesus, who sense what God is doing. We can learn from one another. From lepers. From Samaritans. From Muslims. From

Democrats. From Republicans. God speaks and acts from unlikely sources and in unlikely ways. Some of the earliest followers of Jesus probably heard this story and had a strong reaction to the fact that a *dirty Samaritan* was the one who was praised. But I imagine Jesus saying, “yea, that’s kind of the point. Set down your divisions and pre-conceived notions of people, because God is so much bigger than your preferences or boundaries or expectations.”

So I guess the real questions now are what do *you* need to give thanks for, and what divisions and boundaries do you need to let go of? Only you can answer. Amen.