



“Between Samaria and Galilee”

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Luke 17:11-19 (NRSV)***

If your upbringing was anything like mine, then you had a parent who was concerned that you learn proper manners. I remember being taught as a child that it was very important to behave properly, especially outside the home, and to always use the conventions of polite language: always say please, and always, always say thank you when I am given something, especially if it was Grandma who was doing the giving. Am I right?

When we read this story about the ten lepers from the Gospel of Luke, it's easy for us, with such an upbringing, to see this story as being about gratitude and thankfulness. And certainly, it is about that. The lepers have been showered with an amazing act of grace, and the proper response to such grace is praise and thanksgiving. But I think this story is about something more.

One of the things that captivates me about this story, and leads me to believe that it is more than just a story about nine people who forgot their manners, is the setting. The gospel writer tells us that while on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus passes through the area between Samaria and Galilee. Now, if you look at a map of Israel in the New Testament, you notice that the area between Samaria and Galilee is nowhere near “on the way to Jerusalem.” It's also interesting to consider the relationship between the people who lived in Samaria and the people who lived in Galilee. You might recall that the Samaritans were considered outcasts by Jesus' first century Jewish community—at least as they are portrayed in the New Testament. Although they had the same scriptures and followed the purity laws, the Samaritans did not worship in the temple in Jerusalem, and those in Galilee, and the rest of southern Israel, thought this was heretical. So in Galilee, where Jesus did most of his public ministry, the Samaritans were a despised group considered unfit for association.

Yet Jesus, it would seem, has deliberately entered into this place, this area between what his community considers what is right and what is wrong, an area where he is sure to encounter not only his own folk, but those who are unlike him, whom his community considers unclean. What sort of borderland place is this, this area between Samaria and Galilee? As a Star Trek fan, I think of it as a sort of symbolic Neutral Zone, a place to

create distance between the warring factions, a place where you're really not supposed to be... and if you do go there, you'd better not have your photon torpedoes armed.

What happens in such a place? What happens in the area between two factions who are so diametrically opposed? For the 13th Century Sufi mystic poet, Jelaluddin Rumi, what happens in such a place is the connection of souls, without language and ideology getting in the way. In one of his more well-known poems, Rumi writes:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase *each other*
doesn't make any sense.¹

For Rumi, that field between wrongdoing and righting is a place where opposing sides might discover that they have something in common—and perhaps even that their differences aren't really all that important in the presence of the divine.

In this gospel story, what happens in this place is that Jesus meets ten lepers. These lepers may not have had the specific disease that we now know as Hansen's disease; in biblical times, leprosy was a catch-all term that could be any one of a number of contagious maladies. The main issue was that people with what was called leprosy were ostracized from the community and were untouchable until they were well again. They were outcasts, and people feared them.

The healing of these ten outcast lepers is very usual for healing stories in the gospels. It follows a typical pattern: Jesus is passing through; there is a cry for help. Jesus notices and responds, and healing happens. The lepers are commanded by Jesus to go show themselves to the priests, which was part of the healing ritual involved in being able to come back into the community. It's important to note that the lepers all obey Jesus. They all have faith that something good is about to happen, and even though he wonders about the nine others' apparent lack of gratitude, Jesus doesn't condemn them or take away their healing. What he does do is point out the atypical tenth leper—and here is another indication that there is something deeper going on in this story.

This tenth leper is no ordinary leper, if there is such a thing. Not only is he ostracized because of his disease; he's also ostracized because he's a Samaritan. He's an outcast outcast. There is perhaps no one else that Jesus could have met that would have been so hated and feared—hated because of his beliefs, and feared because of his disease.

¹ Jelaluddin Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks with John Moyne (Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 1997), 36.

But Jesus meets this leper in the field between wrongdoing and rightdoing, and those distinctions between them disappear in the presence of the divine. “Get up and go on your way,” Jesus says. “Your faith has made you well.” The word that Luke uses here for “well” is the same word that’s used for “salvation.” The tenth leper is not merely healed of his disease, but is made whole and transformed in the presence of God.

The healing and transformation of the tenth leper makes me wonder. Is there anyone that Jesus would not meet in the field between wrongdoing and rightdoing? And more critically, it urges me to wonder who is it that I am avoiding meeting in that field.

In his book on conflict mediation, theologian David Augsberger suggests that “Conflict arises from the competition of *same* and *other*.” Those who are the same, those who see themselves on the side of rightdoing, seek to control, subordinate, exclude, and destroy those who they see as other—those who are seen on the side of wrongdoing. We see that exclusion and subordination and destruction of the other in the Bible... and we see it, too in our own society. Not only do we see it, but we also participate in it.

Augsberger goes on to ask, “What if the other is necessary to us, part of us, completing us, redefining us, capable of transforming us? What if the other we fear is the bearer of our healing, our hope, and our health as a human race?”²

What if the Samaritan leper, the person I most hate and fear, is the bearer of my own healing? What if meeting that person in the field is the key to the healing of humanity and the transformation of our world?

I don’t know about you, but it was pretty easy for me to sit down this week and think of a few folks I’d rather not meet, for fear I would forget the manners my mother taught me. The Fox News broadcaster Glenn Beck comes to mind. His criticism of the term “social justice” in the last few months is to my way of thinking a perversion of the biblical mandate to care for the poor. There is also the pastor of the Westboro Baptist church in Topeka, Kansas, Fred Phelps, who wages an anti-homosexual campaign by picketing the funeral services of fallen US soldiers with signs full of hate speech. And perhaps you’ve also heard about one of the assistant Attorney Generals of the state of Michigan, Andrew Shirvell, who carried out a personal vendetta against the first openly gay student body president of the University of Michigan. What would happen if I met them in the field? Could I even have the stomach for it? Yet that is exactly what Jesus asks me—asks us—to do.

Until we understand that the other we fear is necessary to our own transformation, we will never find healing as a human race. Who is the Samaritan leper for you? Who is the outcast outcast, the one you most hate and fear? Jesus invites us into that region between Samaria and Galilee—that space between wrongdoing and rightdoing, between them and us—and bids us find our healing and salvation—and theirs.

² David Augsberger, *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 16.

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

Out in the area between Samaria and Galilee, there is a village. I'll meet you there. And
we shall both be made whole. Amen.