

“The Other Side of the Card”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
October 13, 2019

**Luke 17: 11-19**

I need to begin by saying two things. First, as Lisa and I have shared with you in the past, most of the time we choose our scriptures for a Sunday morning from the Revised Common Lectionary. That is a schedule of readings for every Sunday that rotates on a three-year cycle. So, knowing this was Stewardship Sunday, I chose this passage from Luke from today’s schedule of readings, as it seemed to fit the theme very well.

The other thing I will do when we’re putting the order of worship together for Sundays like today is that I will look up last year’s service, and use that as a model or guide. From there, we will then make any adjustments to this year’s scripture, theme, music, etc.

So, last week I pulled up our Celtic Music/Stewardship Sunday service from 2018. As I went through and updated the song selections and other details, I looked at the scripture from a year ago. It was Luke 17: 11-19. Last year, I decided to break with the lectionary and chose this scripture. I’m preaching on the same scripture, on Stewardship Sunday, two years in a row. Don’t worry – it won’t be the same sermon. Once I realized I had done that, I haven’t looked at what I said last year at all!

The second thing is that I’ve been sick this past week. I ran a fever for five straight days, and after going to the doctor on Monday, was told I needed to let it run its course as an upper respiratory infection. I was out of the office Monday-Wednesday, and finally started feeling better Thursday afternoon and Friday. But I had forgotten how much a fever takes out of you, especially for that many days in a row. I am grateful for many here who carried on while I was at home, and who were understanding when I had to reschedule meetings, etc. And I am grateful for my family for caring for me – especially putting up with my moaning and groaning.

In the aftermath of being sick, I have a deeper appreciation for this story of healing by Jesus. I’m not going to equate my week-long illness with the severity and isolation of leprosy. But I certainly know how it feels to go from feeling miserable and disgusting, to feeling relieved, grateful, and, well, not miserable.

This story from Luke reminds us of the power of God’s grace to heal, restore, and make whole. This story gives us wisdom as to who is included and invited to receive this restorative grace in our world. And this story calls on us to consider once again what we are to do to stop, turn around, and offer praise to the source of our life’s blessings in this world.

To begin, this is a story that only appears in Luke’s Gospel – it is not recorded in the other three gospels. It’s also a story that, as we read in the beginning, takes place “on the way to Jerusalem” (17:11). For Luke, the life and ministry of Jesus is to fulfill God’s mission of salvation for humankind. And that takes place with his betrayal, his crucifixion, and his resurrection. All of which takes place in Jerusalem. So, starting in chapter nine, we read that, “When the

days drew near for him to be taken up, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem” (9:51). Everything that takes place from that point forward, including the story we’ve read this morning, is in this context of Jesus’ purpose and mission “on the way to Jerusalem.”

This story focuses on the ten lepers and their eventual healing by Jesus. In today’s world, leprosy also goes by the name of Hansen’s Disease, and is relatively rare. According to the CDC website, around 150 people in the United States and 250,000 worldwide are diagnosed with it each year. What surprised me was that if it is diagnosed early with proper treatment, it can be totally cured (<https://www.cdc.gov/leprosy/about/about.html>), and it is actually not highly contagious, as we often assume.

Of course, in Jesus’ time, things were a lot different – both in terms of medical care and cultural stigmas. Often those with leprosy were banished outside the walls of the cities or towns for fear of the disease’s spread. People would not come near those afflicted with the disease, and there likely was a sense of perceived judgment by God on those afflicted, almost as if they got what they deserved.

In our story today, notice how physical space is key in understanding the theology and intentionality of Jesus. As he entered the village, ten lepers approach him – “keeping their distance.” They held to the social requirements of the day to not come close with their disease. They call out to him for mercy, and he tells them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” In other words, “Go from your seclusion to the proximity of the temple, so that the priests might bless you.” Nine of them go to the temple. But the tenth – a Samaritan – turns around and comes back. “He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him.” Seeing that he was healed, the tenth leper stopped walking toward the temple, turned around, and, abandoning the cultural norms, came and touched the feet of Jesus. And Jesus did not stop him; he allowed him to come near. The story begins with the sick and diseased keeping their distance; the story ends with the healed being welcomed close into the presence of God.

This story is full of outsiders, and they are who Jesus welcomes on his way to Jerusalem. Throughout the gospels, we witness Jesus healing those who are afflicted with leprosy; in fact, Jesus tells the followers of John the Baptist to report back to him that he has healed lepers (7:21-23). And in this story, we see it is a Samaritan – an outsider in the eyes of the true followers of Judaism – that is depicted as giving praise to God. It mirrors the parable Jesus tells earlier in Luke, of the Samaritan giving aid when no one who should have helped did (10:25-37). Lepers and Samaritans – the marginalized of the world are the ones who are both shown mercy, and who both offer praise to God.

One last thing: when the lepers call out to Jesus, they say, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” Richard Voelz writes: *This address, “Master,” is used only six times in the New Testament, all for Jesus, all in Luke, and all previous to this usage. The previous occurrences all come from the lips of disciples: Simon Peter, the disciples, and John. Now it appears on the lips of the lepers. Given what we know about the boundary-transgressing Jesus at this point in Luke’s narrative, that the lepers would call out to Jesus with the title previously only used by Jesus’ inner circle should come as no surprise to us (or perhaps it is intended to surprise us!) . . .*

*Luke sees in Jesus that faith has the power to heal, but neither faith nor healing is limited by borders and boundaries, whether those boundaries are geographical, religious, social, combination of these, or otherwise . . . Jesus acts with mercy toward outsiders, lauds their faith, eats at a variety of tables, and crosses a variety of boundaries* (Connections, Year C, Volume 3, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2019: 388).

Jesus' mission was to cross boundaries, to show mercy to the afflicted, to eat with sinners and saints, and to show God's boundless love for this world on his way and in Jerusalem. In so doing, Jesus modeled for his followers – his disciples – how to be his hands, his feet, and his heart to this broken and troubled world. Our mission as the Body of Christ, the Church, is to show mercy to the downtrodden, offer hope to the hopeless, bring comfort to the weary, and tell those who feel unclean and unloved that they are welcome, just as we are all welcome, at the feet of our Lord.

Stewardship Sunday is our opportunity, as disciples of Jesus, to say with our commitment of finances and time and talent that we wish to further Christ's mission in this place, at this time, as the Body of Christ at John Knox. It is a moment each year when we are asked to consider what God has given us, and how we are called to turn back to God in gratitude with our pledges of commitment. For some of us, we can do a great deal. For others of us, we can do what we can. For all of us, we are reminded that whatever we give, God is able to do much more when we give with glad and generous hearts.

Most years, I will speak to you about numbers and trends and budgets. Most years, I will speak to you about this side of the pledge card – the one which indicates how much of our finances we are willing to give in the coming year to support the work of God in this place. As you know, I love talking numbers – it can be hard to shut me up about dollars and cents, because I believe passionately that one of the key markers of our faith is how we are willing to first give back to God what God has already given to us.

But this morning, I'm not going to talk about this side of the pledge card. I'm going to talk about the other side of the card. A few weeks ago, I mentioned that one of our elders, Bev Ray, wondered how many hours a month the people of John Knox gave to the work of this church. And so, we added to the reverse side of the pledge card this year a simple way you can indicate, to the best of your ability, the time you give to the life and ministry of John Knox.

The reason I feel that is more important to focus on this morning is that if we aren't committed to Christ's mission with our whole selves, we cannot be the fullest expression of the Body of Christ in this place. If you look at the other side of the card, and notice that the time you are spending in worship, education, service, and mission is not to the same proportion of the money you pledge, then how might that need to change to bring them into alignment with God's purpose for your life? Is this place a necessity for your faith journey and spiritual development? Or has this place become a hobby amid all the other enjoyments you have in life?

It is when our talent, our treasure, and our time are fully invested in God's work that the Body of Christ is able to fulfill its mission to those the world says are unclean. It is when we recognize the depth of God's love for us that we are moved

to stop, to turn around, and give all that we have and all that we are to the one who heals, who mends, and who restores. It is when we experience the depth of relationship in community that we are nourished for this call of discipleship, and we are inspired to invite others to join on this journey to Jerusalem with our Lord and Savior.

If that is something that excites you and you are yearning for, then I've got good news for you. As part of our formative learning experience this year, we are all going to be invited to learn and grow through Table Groups, a form of small group ministry. It will be for a dedicated amount of time, somewhere between three and six months. It will be with some people you may already know, and others you may not know as well. And it will be led by individuals in the church who have a passion and desire for us to draw closer in our bonds as Christ's disciples.

Here's the kicker: EVERYONE will be included and invited to participate. You will all receive an invitation to come and experience Table Groups. If you would prefer to not continue, you are more than welcome to opt out and let others continue. But the Community Action Team believes this is such an important experience for our church that we are beginning with the premise that everyone at John Knox be given this opportunity to experience deepening spiritual formation and nourishment with the time and talent we are willing to give.

And guess what? You already told us this is important to you as a disciple in this congregation. Back in August, we asked you to complete a simple survey about why John Knox matters to you, and what the church can do to help you build stronger connections in community. From those surveys, you indicated that the primary reason you come to John Knox is to grow spiritually (86%). The top two things you said you need from this community of faith are close relationships (58%) and spiritual guidance and mentoring (56%). And the top thing you said the church could do to form stronger connections as a community was to create more options for building relationships (75%). I hope you will see the Table Groups as a wonderful way to meet these expressed needs, and to invest fully all you have – your time, your talent, and your treasure – to strengthen the mission and ministry of Christ at John Knox.

Jesus said to the Samaritan who was healed: "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." May our faith be strengthened through all that we give back to God, so we may get up, go, and tell others what we have been shown by our Lord: all are welcomed, healed, and made whole by our living, loving God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.