

"Ten Lepers"

Luke 17:11-19
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"And he was a Samaritan."

The Gospel writer Luke throws in this simple line. Not only was there only **one** leper who returned to give thanks for the healing, but the one who returned was a **Samaritan**.

It is hard to emphasize enough the offense of that small detail. In fact, it appears again and again throughout the Gospels. Jesus speaks with a **Samaritan** woman at the well, committing about five infractions of Jewish law in one lazy afternoon. Jesus tells the story about the healing of a man found beaten and left for dead on the roadside and says that the only person who helped was a **Samaritan**. So important was this story to the early church that we have come to name hospitals after that Good Samaritan.

This story that Luke remembers about the Samaritan leper who gave thanks plays wonderfully with images of racial stereotypes and our deepest fears and anxieties that are always connected to them. "Everybody's gotta hate somebody" goes the cynical wisdom, and every people has found scape goats on which to place all that is wrong with the world. After placing all potential for all the forces of darkness on a particular people, we rightly fear them.

For the good people of Jesus' time, even, we would suppose, Jesus' own family and friends, racial and religious hatred directed at the Samaritans was intense. The story of Israel's hatred of the Samaritans goes back, as all racial hatreds do, many generations, back before anyone can really remember.

Some 700 years before Jesus' birth, the Assyrians raided and conquered the northern areas of Israel, including the area called Samaria. In order to break up the ethnic and tribal identity of Samaria and the Jews who lived there, Assyria shrewdly moved other conquered peoples into Samaria and encouraged and insisted that they intermarry.

Samaritans did intermarry, and during that time their religious practices changed. They became a different people. Like people from different religious backgrounds today. When they intermarry, even though they try very hard, the intermarriage has an effect on the practice of their faith.

A Jew who marries a Muslim becomes a very different kind of Jew, if he or she remains a religious Jew at all. In my day, when a Catholic married a Protestant, one or the other had to give in on their faith for the sake of the children, or the children would not be raised in either faith, or perhaps in no faith at all. It need not be that way today; but even today, interreligious marriages have an effect on the other's faith.

So Samaritans intermarried while most other Jews went off into exile in Babylon. And during that time, their religious practices began to change. The Samaritans became a different people. Sort of "half-breeds" we might call them; a people without a clear racial identity. Only about 500 Samaritans exist today. They remain a sect, an isolated people.

But in Jesus' day, Samaritans were not tolerated and the hatred was mutual.

Jews who traveled through Samaria were often way-laid and beaten—at least that's the story every young Jewish boy and girl was told. It was very likely true. To Jesus' people, there was no such thing as a "Good Samaritan."

Thus here is the irony in the stories that Luke loves to tell about Jesus. In the story of the ten lepers, we have a clear lesson about the importance of thanksgiving, the importance of always remembering where our blessings come from. But Luke remembers something else about Jesus. He transcended the bitter hatred toward the Samaritan people, and often used them as good examples of right behavior.

Jesus told probably his most well-known parable and made the good guy a Samaritan. "Who is the neighbor to the man who was found beaten and left for dead?" goes the rhetorical question from Jesus. The command to love your neighbor becomes, in Jesus' telling, a command to love your enemies. Enemies in concrete terms, not just in the abstract. Real enemies in a black and white world.

In the telling of the story of Jesus and the ten lepers, we are another step removed from respectable company. Now the Samaritan has leprosy. Leprosy doesn't mean very much to us today. Hansen's disease we call it, and very few people in our part of the world have it. But it was an epidemic then and lepers were segregated and quarantined and forced to beg. Maybe AIDS is our current equivalent to leprosy.

So, imagine a person who is ethnically outcast with a disease that casts him out further. People on the margins of the margins of the margins of society.

This wonderful and painful image we have to this day, of Jesus keeping company with outcasts of every sort comes essentially from this sort of story. We are not sure why Jesus would have such an affinity for such despised people as the Samaritans, except that we know that Jesus himself is a descendent of mixed ethnic background. Even the royal

lineage of David itself descends from Ruth the Moabitess, a daughter of another group of despised and hated people living in a land now occupied by Syria and Jordan. We read in Nehemiah 13:1-3 for example, this little regulation that "No Ammonite or Moabite was ever to be permitted to join God's people. This was because the people of Ammon and Moab did not give food and water to the Israelites on their way out of Egypt." Talk about holding grudges!

Yet one of the most tender and beautiful stories in all the Bible is about Ruth, the Moabitess who left her people to follow her mother-in-law into Israel, saying, "Wherever you go, I will go, Where you live there shall I live. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God too." Ruth, you will remember, married Boaz; they begat Obed and Obed begat Jesse and Jesse begat David, which began the Royal household out of which Jesus came. Jesus too, is a half breed!

Everybody's gotta hate somebody, and it seems that the Israelites hated the Moabites and Samaritans the most, and here we have two stories that toy with these ancient prejudices in a profound and simply beautiful way. It is the Samaritan who returns to give thanks, a foreigner acting uncharacteristically.

Luke, the evangelist and author of this Gospel as well as the book of Acts, was also of foreign extraction, as far as we can tell. He was very likely a Greek, and not a Jew first of all. It would be characteristic of him therefore to remember Jesus' attitude toward the foreigners and the outcasts of all sorts and kinds.

But we lack such vision in our age, indeed in every age. It seems to be such a necessity for us to hate somebody. I have always loved Tom Lehrer's song from the 1950s, called the "Merry Minuet", which goes like this:

*The whole world is festering with unhappy souls
The French hate the Germans, the Germans hate the Poles,
Italians hate Yugoslavs, South Africans hate the Dutch,
And I don't like anybody very much.*

Ethnic stereotypes as a way of explaining the complex world in which we live seem never to go away. The dangers of generalizing our fears after September 11 to a whole nation and ethnic group are great. But we seem to have that in check, thus far at least.

Jesus liked to demonstrate the craziness of the Gospel as against this human penchant to blame all our problems on other races and ethnic groups. Ten lepers are healed and only one comes back. "Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

So this story, like so many of the stories about Jesus has two points. The first is that we should return and give God thanks and praise for all we have been given. Do not hold back. Do not be stingy. It is far better to count one's blessings and give thanks than to count all the things that are wrong with our lives and stew in them. Someone once observed that, "Things work out for the best for those who make the best out of the way things turn out." Those who can count blessings and give thanks are among the most spiritually and physically healthy people on earth because they know how to make the best out of the way things turn out.

The second point that would have been more apparent to the people of Jesus time is that foreigners, especially despised foreigners, are consistently raised up by Jesus as examples of the best we can be as human beings. And such examples as these fly directly in the face of our most cherish prejudices.

And they're supposed to.

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