

“On the Journey to Jerusalem”
Luke: Jesus and the Outcasts, Outsiders and Outlaws”
Luke 17:11-17 CEB
Sunday, March 19th, 2023
Medford UMC; NJ
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I once heard a story about a man who had a very comfortable, high-paying job – 401K, corner office, the whole bit. Well, as the years passed, he grew more and more restless about the constant reports of shipwrecks at a nearby dangerous coastline. His heart would drop every time he read the death toll of another wreck. So one day, with nothing but faith, he got up the courage to quit his job, and buy a small hut and boat to be a one-man life-saving station.

He was dedicated to his work and saved many lives. Many of those saved were so moved by his devotion, that they decided to join in his mission. This went on for years until the man had to move away, but the group agreed to stay and continue this important work.

Just like the man before them, they worked night and day on the lookout for those lost at sea. As more and more lives were saved, the life-saving station received more and more attention. Everyone wanted to get involved, even those who’d never been personally impacted by this work. Funding grew, bigger/fancier boats were purchased, the training became more elite. What once was just a man in a hut trying to save others became something that everyone wanted attached to their name.

Members grew uncomfortable with the small building, and had a new building built with beds and fine furniture. The life-saving station became a community club for events and gained membership fees. Few involved were now even interested in going out on lifesaving missions, so as funding grew, they began to hire crews to do the work instead. Despite the fact that the club members no longer went and saved lives, they kept the symbol of a lifeboat at the center of all their decorating and marketing.

Well, one day, a particularly large shipwreck occurred, and the paid crew members brought boatload after boatload of terrified, dirty, drenched, sick people from another part of the world to the life-saving station, but instead of bringing them in, a committee had an emergency shower put in outside, so that the inside could remain clean. This caused a severe split amongst the members.

The majority voted that the club discontinue its lifesaving efforts as it was only causing a disturbance to club life. A small few members though, wanted the focus to remain on lifesaving so after being voted out, they began a new lifesaving station.

What then started as a small lifesaving station by a dedicated few, in only a few short years, followed the same path as the original until they saw a split, and a third new station began. This went on and on, and if you were to visit that very coastline today, you would drive past exclusive club after exclusive club lining the water where lifesaving stations once were, all with the symbol of a boat still prominent on their signs. Despite

the modernizing world, shipwrecks still occur regularly in those waters. Unfortunately, without a dedicated lifesaving station, most drown.

If this story sounds familiar – it should. It’s a story about church history. It’s a story about Christianity. It’s a story that the Gospel of Luke is desperately trying to keep us away from: from creating a mission, slapping a cross on things, but abandoning the mission as soon as it requires us to be uncomfortable, or to interact with those on the margins, or to allow people to scuff the floors.

So far in our Lenten dive into the Book of Luke, we began by looking at the birth of Christ and how God chose those young and old alike to have important callings, we talked about the significance of women in the spreading of the good news, and the way the Jesus lifts the voices of the outcasts in His parables.

Today, we see Jesus well on His way to Jerusalem, and in this text, Jesus helps those who are sick and outcasted away from society and in doing so, exemplifies what it looks like to serve those on the margins, those who need help. Luke is a particularly thoughtful writer, and it is in the details of the way he tells this story that we see Christ’s example of how to serve those in need.

The first detail I want to bring to our attention is in the opening part of the text: *“On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, **ten men with skin diseases approached him.**”*

The phrasing here is significant in the way it differs from how those with leprosy are usually spoken about. These aren’t “10 lepers” but “10 men with leprosy – with skin diseases”. Earlier in Luke, there was reference not to a paralytic, but to “a man who was paralyzed” and, not a demonic man but “a man who had demons”. Simply in his introducing of the characters, Luke is showing us the importance of seeing people first, before anything else – before any illness, before any characterizing, before any biases or judgements that come with who a person is. These aren’t lepers – they are men who also happen to have skin diseases.

The text goes on to say: *“Keeping their distance from him, they raised their voices and said, “Jesus, Master, show us mercy (healing)!”* As mentioned in previous sermons about those with leprosy, it was a terrible existence to be outcasted with the disease. According to the law book of Leviticus, *“Anyone with an infection of skin disease must wear torn clothes, dishevel their hair, cover their upper lip, and shout out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’*

They will be unclean as long as they are infected. They are unclean. They must live alone outside the camp.” And, not having the medical knowledge we have today, many skin related ailments that weren’t even contagious, would have put you in the situation of someone with leprosy.

Interestingly, over the past couple years, we’ve gotten a slight taste of what the sort of isolation these people experienced was like. The general quarantine of 2020, of course, but particularly if you’re someone who either lived alone in 2020, or who got COVID and had to be isolated from others – we can now offer empathy

towards these individuals who, because of a skin ailment, may become isolated without anyone touching their shoulder or giving them a hug for YEARS, perhaps the rest of their life!

Earlier in Luke, when Jesus heals someone with leprosy, He does so by touching them – an act that they so desperately needed after being alone so long. Here, Luke offers us an important detail – the men are keeping their distance from Jesus as they have been taught to, but Jesus isn't keeping His distance from them. That's not to say, don't follow quarantine rules, that's not what I'm advocating. But often, those on the margins are used to people avoiding them, walking on the other side of the street, maybe even running away from them. Here, Jesus exemplifies the power of not adding distance between ourselves and those in need.

This concept makes me think of a set of photos that made the rounds on social media awhile back of global pop-star, Lady Gaga, posing with a gentleman who was homeless. As the story goes, she was leaving her hotel, a crowd formed to greet her, and on the outskirts of the crowd was a man experiencing homelessness. Lady Gaga walked up to him, and gave him one of the flowers she was holding, and he in turn gave her a ring on his finger, basically the last thing he had besides for the clothes on his back. When she leaned in to get a photo with him, he said, "But I smell" and she replied with, "Don't worry, I smell too". She then gave him the money in her pocket and went on her way, but the internet was ablaze with the powerful act of compassion, of seeing this man for who he was and not what he was experiencing, and closing the distance between her and him that most others put in between themselves and those who are experiencing homelessness.

Lady Gaga, who published a book called "Channel Kindness" has said, "To me, almost every problem you can think of can be solved with kindness. At least it could be made better". By not running away, or even taking a step back from the men, Jesus showed them a kindness that others were taught not to do.

The last piece of today's text that I want to bring to our attention is the way Luke uses physical sight to exemplify spiritual sight. The text reads, "*When **Jesus saw them**, he said, 'Go, show yourselves to the priests.' As they left, they were cleansed. One of them, **when he saw** that he had been healed, returned and praised God with a loud voice. He fell on his face at Jesus' feet and thanked him. He was a Samaritan.*

Earlier in Luke, Jesus blesses the disciples' eyes and ears which then leads into the parable of the Good Samaritan, where the priest, Levite, and Samaritan all "see" the man in the ditch, but only one acts on it. Here, we are given a similar lesson, that seeing someone may be more than a physical thing, but also a spiritual, divine thing.

All 10 men received God's goodness but only one "saw" God in that goodness. I'd argue that the story has next to nothing to do with physical healing – it has to do with God seeing us (and all our flaws, and all our mistakes, and all our messiness) and us seeing God (in all the good that exists in spite of the frailties of humanness). Shouldn't we follow Christ's example and see people beyond their flaws, or their mistakes, or their

messiness, beyond the attributes that prompt judgement in our hearts? When we see, truly see, the humanness of others, we invite people to see God.

It reminds me of a testimony by Christian author and Registered Nurse, Patricia Miller, who once wrote about a particularly significant moment she had after 5 years working in an emergency room. As she tells it, she had gotten to a place where she became very cold and unfeeling to what was happening around her. Amongst the chaos and suffering and death and fear she faced in the people who came through the hospital doors, she became numb to it. It bled into her personal life, and she found herself feeling very hopeless, life seemed meaningless and void of joy. But God had a different plan.

One night, she was taking down information for a young woman who was brought in for a drug overdose. The woman's mother, "unkempt and bleary eyed" as Patricia describes her, was telling her about how the police came in the middle of the night to bring her to the hospital.

In her story, Patricia admits to thinking, "Another dead-end kid from another useless mother," and simply wishing that the mother would hurry up with her story. Impatiently, Patricia finished the report and went to copy the insurance cards. It was in that moment that God intervened. "*You didn't even look at her*" she heard in her heart, "*You didn't even look at her.*"

Guilt broke through her coldness. She apologized to God, and went back out to the panicked mother. She looked right into her eyes with every ounce of love and compassion that God was pouring into her and told the mother simply, "Don't give up."

That was all that was needed for the mother to completely break down and release all the anxiety and shame she was experiencing. She shared with Patricia about the years of trying to single parent a particularly rebellious child and being overtaken by both her and her daughters failures. The mother thanked Patricia and in return, Patricia held her in a long embrace. Not only did God's promise of hope find this mother, but it also found Patricia.

Her life was never the same after that, care and compassion flowed easily from her to every patient she then had. Brokenness was not the end of the story, and as she puts it, she was excited to go to work again.

In Luke's stories about Christ journey to Jerusalem where, despite the urgency of the situation, Jesus continues to stop and help and heal – we are gifted the example of how to serve those that society has put on the outskirts: Identify people as beloved children of God before anything else, allow a closeness that others deprive people of, and simply see people, really see them – because that's when we see God. Let's keep our eyes on the coastline, and not in keeping things neat.