

Sermon: Thanksgiving Sunday, October 13, 2019 – Luke 17: 11-19
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Borderlands.

We live in a world where border crossings have an ominous tone. We are familiar with the endless vehicle lineups at the US/Canada border, or queues at the airport, going through a mental checklist – do I have citrus fruit with me? What's the total value of purchases? But in much of the world, border crossings evoke images of Walls being built and families separated... migrants rescued from sea... the Irish, concerned what their border might become again... Palestinian workers forced to produce work visas every day when going to work and returning home, just so the government can prove who's the boss.

Jesus, too, lived in a world where border crossings had an ominous tone. Even in the ancient world, as Jesus and the disciples went from one region to another, they would have encountered border checkpoints. While some of the borders between regions would have been as inconsequential as passing from one Canadian Province to another, some of them would have had gates and toll booths and threats and corruption and a demand for proof of citizenship.

Today's reading from Luke is shaped by two kinds of borders. First, it was in a border territory described by Luke as "the region between Samaria and Galilee" (v.11) – remembering that travelers from Galilee to Judea would often go around Samaria rather than through it, because of the deep hatred and distrust between Jews and Samaritans. Second, when someone has a dreaded skin disease – rendered by the term "leprosy" in most Bibles but referring to a wide range of terrible afflictions – the religious laws of the book of Leviticus made it clear that it was your responsibility to verbally and visually warn those around you – to create a border, if you will. If by some wondrous occurrence you were cured of the disease, there was a specific sequence to be followed, with a priest examining you and signing off on your being allowed to re-enter society. So in today's reading, the ten people with dreaded skin disease kept their distance from Jesus, (v.12) calling for his help, but not breaching the physical border between them; and once he started their process of cure, he sent them to the priests (v.14) so they could get their official stamp of approval. They are sent by Jesus to cross the border, from disease, through cure, to restoration to the broader community, according to prescribed rules.

But one of them, didn't follow the rules. All ten noticed, on their way to the priests, that their symptoms were disappearing before their eyes and nine of them did what they were told and what the law required, and went directly to the priests. But one took a different route.

When you are going through a border crossing, what don't you do? Well, you learn pretty quickly not to volunteer information you aren't asked, but you ALSO don't turn around part way through and try to go through the other way. But this one freshly-cured person, in the potentially violent environment of a political, ethnic and religious borderland, in the public health borderland of being cured-but-not-yet-certified, doubles back to give thanks to Jesus. His need to express gratitude and praise to the holy one who has given him a new life to live, takes precedence.

I'm so glad that this story shows up at this time of year, at the time that Canadians celebrate Thanksgiving and, as it turns out, the month that Ralph Connor is talking about Giving Thanks through our Pledge Fest. For as we are giving thanks for whatever harvest came in before the snow, and expressing gratitude for all of life's gifts, we meet up with ten people whose lives were changed beyond measure. All, we can assume, personally rejoiced, but one saw his good fortune as part of a bigger picture. One of needed to give thanks so urgently, that he delayed the final step required to be declared "cured" in the eyes of the law and went back to Jesus instead, perhaps even putting him at risk by not going directly to the priests.

There is, to be sure, ambiguity built into this text. We know that at least one of those who were diseased was a Samaritan, but was he or she the only Samaritan in the group of ten? We know that they were sent off to the priests, but where? – Jerusalem was too far away. Did the

Samaritan turn back purely out of gratitude, or because they, unlike the others, didn't actually HAVE a priest he could go and see? Were the nine who didn't return to Jesus ungrateful? They didn't return to glorify Jesus but we're told nothing of the remainder of their lives. Does the Samaritan in this story represent just the Samaritans, or all Gentiles who used to be "outside the promise" but are now invited in? So we, and centuries of Bible translators, try to follow the story as a story and not a textbook... and when we do so, are welcomed to explore the contrast between inclusion and exclusion, safety and danger, wholeness and illness, and in the end, the interplay between Christ's restorative love and our own urge to express gratitude.

Where are the borderlands of life? As mentioned earlier, in our world there are many volatile borders, and many political leaders playing off the hatred and suspicion of those on the other side of the border. There is much to explore in the metaphor of "borderlands" but for those living along those borders, it's no mere metaphor. In those turbulent places there needs to be political will, and courageous leadership, a thirst for and a theology of reconciliation. So on this day we bring to mind those places in the world where national borders are hostile, and lift that into the consciousness we share with God the peacemaker.

With only eight days to go until election day, we see how much effort each party and each candidate puts into defining their borders. Life inside their borders will be terrific, we are told, so much better than the borders defined by their opponents. And we wonder – in our nation, and in the ongoing travails of our neighbours to the south – if the needs of those who have the least, and the needs of a threatened planet, and the divisions that at times overwhelm all else, will get any attention at all in a system built on division rather than solutions. So on this day we invite God's wisdom into these partisan borderlands, to refocus the process on need, and cooperation, and service.

We have decided as a community of faith, just under a month ago, to formally enter the borderlands of inclusivity as an Affirming Ministry. From my viewpoint as a person well served by privilege, I might not even see how exclusion could be a scary, threatening place. But occasionally I do sense what it is like to be the only person in the room of a particular ethnicity or gender expression, what it is like to be barred from an activity because I can't afford it, what it is like to be stymied by a space whose physical barriers limit my participation, what it is like to be targeted by laws or policies that tell me to keep my distance just like the ten diseased ones in today's story. In those times, I recognize that to be an Affirming Ministry, is to defiantly walk into the borderlands, and let our words and actions and priorities be changed by Christ, the loving advocate who is already there.

Where, in your life's journey, have you traveled in unsafe borderlands? When have you been unsettled by transitions, ones you have chosen or ones you have been forced into? When have you walked in the valley of challenged health or unknown diagnosis? When have you had to keep your distance, or known that your presence was unwelcome? When have you had to choose between leaving or returning? In all of these times, past or present, the uncertainty of borderland has been real and, I hope, so has the companionship and support of God and those who entrust themselves to reach out in God's gracious love.

I name all these difficult places, because we gather today in the name of Christ Jesus, who is well acquainted with all borderlands: all places of conflict or chaos or terror, all liminal places between where we had been and where we will be next. The story of the ten people healed, starts with a group of people whose lives were defined by their contagion. In the eyes of the able-bodied community they were considered not a person, but a dreaded condition to be avoided. The only community they had, was others afflicted by the same disease. And when you think of the emotional weight of the word, "leper" you get a sense of how marginalized and diminished their lives were. They saw Jesus and they called out to Jesus and in Jesus they were made whole again. Not only were their symptoms reversed, once they were proclaimed clean they could re-enter their villages, their families, their homes. The God who will not let us be defined by brokenness, brought wholeness again that day. To ten people, all ten of them.

And one found the gracious gift of gratitude, and lifted it all to another level. The Samaritan – labelled even by Jesus as “this foreigner” – embraced this new opportunity as a God-given gift, and as an opportunity to glorify God’s goodness. And as people gathered in Christ’s name, that shapes our response, too.

It shapes us when we are companions to one who is in a tough situation, someone who needs to know that they won’t be abandoned by us, or by God. It shapes us when we are advocating for those who ask for our voices to join their voice. And it shapes us when we are the ones on a difficult path, and have experienced the amazing love of Christ, restore us to community and bring us alive again.

Later in the service, we’re going to hear from a couple of people expressing their stories of gratitude, and I need to share mine too. A few weeks ago, I spoke of a time in my life twenty years ago, when clinical depression took me out at the knees. A burgeoning ministry with a young congregation came to an end, just like that. And through the love of family and friends, through medical care that was both skilled and spiritually grounded, through an excellent non-Church workplace that gave me the opportunity to grow, and through a couple of years worshipping with Grace Baptist Church, Calgary and their exceptional ministry team, I came to the point in life where I, like the healed Samaritan, could turn around, and come back to Christ Jesus, and say thank you.

And the place that welcomed me back to my calling as a United Church Minister, was this place. I can scarcely describe what that was like and what it continues to be like. To sense, right from day one, how open you are to encounter and embody the love of Christ, in familiar ways and in brand-new ways. To benefit from the wisdom of life experiences gained in so many places, now shared generously in this place. To watch the Spirit bubbling up in your thoughts and words and actions, reaching beyond these walls into broader community-focused ventures, and be amazed with you at where that takes us. To hold me when I had losses and to trust me to walk with you in yours. To feel your confidence, not only in me but in the God I serve. I am proud but more than proud, blessed, by this congregation, and so certain that God has a mission that has been given us not to invent, but to enact. Yeah, most of us would like to be twenty years younger and to have a cadre of folks twenty years younger than that coming in behind us, but that can’t get in the way of what Christ can do and is doing right here, right now. Each of us, at some level, has the opportunity to pause, and turn from the busyness of our lives, and thank and glorify God for bringing us to this place, and for entrusting to us the challenges of living in and emerging from life’s borderlands.

In the borderland between Samaria and Galilee, in the borderland between the clean and the unclean, in the borderland between hopefulness and hopelessness, Jesus engaged, and spoke, and healed. In that place of despair, new life was found by ten out of ten, and one grasped the fullness of what it is, not only to be cured but to be made whole again, and responded to that in gratitude and praise. Thanks be to Christ Jesus, who is always present in those places, and calls us to hope, and courage, and mission, and gratitude. Amen.

© 2019 Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church.