



*Thanksgiving Eve, November 24, 2010
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Courageous Gratitude Luke 17:11-19

I'm bursting with gratitude for you. Among you I have enjoyed the most marvelous learning laboratory a future pastor could possibly hope for. One of the first things Pastor Stuart encouraged me to do was 'big picture thinking'. One of the things he asked me to think about was seminary. I was tentative at first, but I was pleasantly surprised to find how much I loved studying theology. It took about 5 years before I realized that asking the questions of Ordination would be a good thing for me to do. During the 3 years it takes to do this I have been blessed by God's grace to work with Mark, Jeremy and Jim. Each of them, along with the session, and Sisters with Shari (explain), has helped me grapple with God's call on my life and ministry. I am so grateful for Mark's persistent prayers and sage advice, for Jeremy's invitations to 'dig deeper', and for Jim's way of getting at difficult topics by simply saying, 'you know Shari...'. Yes, I know, sit up, and take notes! Now with seminary studies done, ordination exams complete, as of last week I am 'certified ready to receive a call'. What's next? I long to be in pastoral ministry that involves significant missions engagement. Where that might be is up to the Lord. Meanwhile my family and I want you to know that we have been blessed beyond measure by this church, and are so grateful. Thank You.

One of the blessings of serving in my role is helping to discern the missional direction of our church. This often involves taking teams of people into places where we grapple with what it means to be the church in the midst of adversity, poverty, or conflict. Tonight's scripture text came to life for me in a very real way during a recent mission trip. Here Jesus is shaping his disciples, and us, in our attitude to outsiders. Let's read it first and then dive in.

[Read: Luke 17:11-19]

Our text makes it clear that the peoples of this region found it hard to get along with one another. Jesus and his disciples witnessed this first hand. And travelers today do too. Recently Lance Brown and I co led a Missions and Renewal team to Israel and the West Bank.

Spending time tracing Jesus' footsteps in the Galilee can be inspiring. We marveled at the beauty of the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth and strolled the hillsides near the places where Jesus taught and fed thousands. But we also noticed just how hard it is to be the church in the land of Jesus today. First century division between the Jews and Samaritans are mirrored in the 21st century hostilities between Israelis in the Galilee and Palestinians of the West Bank. So great is the tension now that a tall security wall and military check points determine peoples travel routes. This makes it nearly impossible for followers of Jesus in Israel to share fellowship with Palestinian Christians in the West Bank.

At a checkpoint outside Jenin our guide was strongly encouraged to turn us around. Going inside the West Bank could *'prove difficult'*. But we were eager to keep our appointment with the leaders of Canaan Fair Trade. Canaan was providing sustainable ways for olive farmers in this region to make a living. Stability was returning. People were encouraged. And so we went, grappling with all we were witnessing as we passed between Samaria and Galilee. And isn't it just our Lord to surprise us along the way. Here's what happened....

As our visit to the Canaan olive processing plant drew to a close, our hosts offered a simple invitation that went like this, *"You know, since you're in the area and all, we wondered if you'd be interested in seeing an old church in a nearby town?"* We weren't sure we really wanted to go to the trouble of seeing one more church, even if it was the polite thing to do. But there was something about their invitation that piqued our curiosity. We agreed to go. Once we found a spot to park our mini-bus, our guide sent the neighborhood kids scurrying to find 'the guy with the key'. Young men began to gather; they joined in, curious that Americans were in town. Apparently the church did not get many visitors.

Winding our way through narrow streets we were directed into a small stone courtyard. It was laden with fragrant roses. From there our team was ushered into a small sanctuary adorned in traditional eastern décor. Since the 3rd century a Christian church has been worshipping at this site making this one of the oldest churches in the world. None of us had even heard of this church. But here we stood touching a 4th century baptismal fount and peering into the eyes of ancient icons.

What is so remarkable about this place we asked? [Show video without audio] Please come this way, watch your step, duck your head, and stepping into a small side chapel we were asked to look up, "see the hole in the ceiling?," said our guide. "That's where food and provisions were lowered down to the lepers who lived in this cave on the outskirts of town". Ah, our text. Our guide went on to tell us that when Jesus walked through their town, he healed 10 lepers who had been living here, in this very place.

Why might 10 lepers be together? Seems their shared bond of leprosy trumps their ethnic and religious diversity. When your body is falling apart and you are cut off from everyone who isn't desperately sick, the differences between Samaritans and Jews just don't seem to matter all that much. These guys had formed a community, perhaps having done so years ago when they were teenagers. Lepers had to live outside of town. A cave like this one suited them nicely. They were required to announce their disease, yelling 'unclean, unclean' whenever others were present. They were dependant on the compassion of others in order to survive. They were not welcome guests at 'Mom's' for Thanksgiving. They couldn't shop in the marketplace or sit next to you in the pew or even go to church at all.

Samaritans were despised by Jews for reasons too numerous to go into tonight. Trust me it was bad. So bad that the only good reason a Jew might associate with a Samaritan was for mere survival. Think of it this way, Jewish lepers were just like Samaritans. They were marginalized people you avoided at all costs. Lepers did not have the luxury to exclude 'social misfits' from their congregation. A loyal band of brothers meant survival.

We could hardly believe it, we were standing in the former home of lepers who had cried out to Jesus and received their healing. As I ran my fingers along the cave walls it struck me that more than any other place we'd been, this one was special to me. Oddly, but wonderfully, what happened here gives hope to people caught up in exclusion. It meant they could be embraced. What happened here gives hope even to those of us who are **insiders** and not 'outsiders'.

Landscape now in focus; let's go look at to the story. Jesus sees and hears the commotion of the 10 crying out. It doesn't matter to Jesus that most are Jews and one is not. He sees people in need of healing and simply says, "Go, the 10 of you, and find priests to show yourselves to". And they do. Apparently not one of them waited around for proof that they had been healed, the pack of them dash off. But this healing of 10 is just the start of something wonderful.

One leper comes back. One is grateful enough to turn around. Not one of Jesus' fellow Jews. A despised Samaritan. This **one** has the courage to break from the pack. Jesus heals him, welcomes his worship, and affirms his faith in God. He pronounces the Samaritan 'well'. The word here means to be made safe and sound. Brought out of a difficult situation, restored. What does it mean that the one who breaks away is Samaritan? Luke thinks this is very important. He begs us to pay attention to this, noting that Jesus asks 3 rhetorical questions,

Where not 10 cleansed? Yes.

Where are the other 9? He doesn't tell us.

Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner? Isn't it interesting that the one who had the least experience with a Jewish Rabbi ran back to worship at his feet. This **one** with the best reason to complain, this **one** has faith enough to get it about Jesus and he is commended for it.

Isn't it interesting that Jesus' disciples have to be taught by him about his heart for the lost? And he uses a Samaritan to do it. Apparently it wasn't enough for them to hear the parable of the Good Samaritan. Now it was time to meet one. Jesus deliberately takes his followers into an uncomfortable situation in order for them to be more like him. Sometimes Jesus walks us into places where we are going to be uncomfortable too. Stay put and keep at it. Take courage. Something precious just may unfold.

What is it about this Samaritan and his response to Jesus that we should notice?

Well, he had courage to break away, to turn around, and to shower Jesus with enthusiastic thanksgiving. The literal word is loud. We Presbyterians don't tend to be loud in our praise of God, do we? I knew a guy growing up who was Lebanese, he was the dad of my friend Dion. When Lou was excited about something everyone knew about it. Sometimes it was almost embarrassing to receive his love and praise, it was so...enthusiastic! But honestly, don't we mostly love having guys like Lou around? Maybe you know someone like Lou. I hope so. Can you imagine behaving like this Samaritan? Loud and with gusto! Makes you smile, doesn't it? I bet it made smile Jesus too!

The praise and gratitude of the Samaritan leper was a delight to Jesus and possibly a bit puzzling to the disciples. Weren't the Jewish lepers more inclined to return to a rabbi with gratitude? Where were those guys? And what is up with the foreigner? Cross cultural settings can be tricky to navigate. Here they see their master in new way. And they are astonished to see his heart for the outcast in a new way. Now we know what Jesus' disciples didn't know then. We know that this guy and the people who live in his home town—in Bequinn, where the cave church is—will one day follow the resurrected Jesus and become part of his church. It's tempting to think, well yeah, that's obvious. But is it? Do we give room in our lives, even in our pews for unlikely people? People like the Samaritan? Do we go out of our way to demonstrate the love of God to marginalized people? How would we know? There is a short 3-lettered word we tend to label the marginalized with: "too". We're inclined to say, "Oh they're just too... something". Too what? Out of the way? Conflicted, back water? Uninterested,

uneducated, unappreciative, skeptical, complicated, poor, fanatical, old, zealous, messed up, young, far gone. A thoughtful examination of this passage might make us sit up and say, huh? Really, go such lengths? Follow Jesus 'there'? It's audacious to say, but don't we really wonder if it's worth it sometimes to risk resources, time, energy, talent, you name it on 'Samaritans'?

When I think of the Samaritan leper's gratitude it gives me pause to think about who I've marginalized. There was a time when I wrote off the church in Myanmar/Burma. Way too complicated to make sense of it. Not until I became friends with Laurie Dawson and spent countless hours in conversation, prayer, and grappling together did I get it about the minority ethnic peoples of Burma. I took me years to see them as Jesus wanted me to. It can take years to get it, and even then the way forward in relationship is not always clear. Now a decade later, it makes sense to many of us why we walk with them, doesn't it? Aren't you glad that long before it was popular or easy to do so we began as church to care for these marginalized people? Even tonight as we sit here cozy and warm elder Art Moore and Laurie's 81 year old dad Allan Eubank are trudging their way Burma together. Both are on their first journey inside. When asked why Allan would go at this 'age' he said "it's because I have something they don't, I have the gospel good news of Jesus Christ and I want to share it with them". He has courageous gratitude.

There was a time when I also wrote off the church in the Holy Land. You know there are churches in Israel and in the West Bank, right? For a long time the conflict both fascinated and completely baffled me. It seemed intractable. Not until several of us became friends with Salim & Kay Munayer and Evan & Maala Thomas did a vision for reconciliation emerge. Now we are beginning to see barriers to friendship coming down. Through Sound & Sand Encounters we are playing a pivotal role in creating space for Jewish Messianic believers and Palestinian Christians to meet, share fellowship as brothers and sisters in Christ, and work to overcome the pervasive conflict that divides them as people. Aren't you glad we've been courageous to do this when it is not popular or easy to do so?

Isn't the lesson Jesus teaches about the marginalized also applicable to the homeless, the incarcerated, and the orphaned? It is not easy to walk alongside outsiders, yet we strive to do so. Honestly, I'm in awe of the way we follow Christ together as a community in mission to others. Food on the chancel tonight, Giving Tree in the lobby, Gifts of Hope, Fair Trade, outreach to kids at risk, teens in pain... on and on. May it always be so. May Chapel Hill forever have the Samaritan—the outcasts—in mind when we choose who and how to serve. Almost every family has some outsider that's part of them, don't they? I do. They may not quite be an outsider as the Samaritan leper was... in fact they might be sitting beside you right now. Aren't you grateful they're here, or coming tomorrow for dinner, or that you have plans to call them? Good for you. Keep at it... even when it's not easy or popular to do so.

In closing here's something I've noticed over the years here. People who keep the Samaritan in mind know Jesus and long to find ways for others to know him too. They tend to have an expansive grace-filled view of the world and an abundance of gratitude. They have a way of drawing others in. It's no wonder people enjoy being around them!

Maybe you're yet to meet Jesus. Stick around. Someone will introduce you. Maybe you're just starting your journey with Jesus, and you're learning to include Samaritans, this is a good place to practice.

On this Thanksgiving Eve aren't we grateful for the grace in Jesus for each of us? I hope you'll pause tomorrow around your dinner table to show enthusiastic gratitude to God for the gift of

His Son Jesus. Will this be easy or hard for you to do at your table? Maybe you simply start with something like, "What I'm so grateful for this Thanksgiving is..."

May you be courageous in your gratitude and in so doing welcome others to say so too. It is meant to spill out of us. It's good for us and for the world that Jesus comes to save. Pray. Amen.