

Sermon: Going Past Healed

Year C, Proper 23

[Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Psalm 66:1-2; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19](#)

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Jeremiah is writing to those sent into exile in Babylon, in modern day Iraq. Not all the ancient Israelites were sent into exile, just those who had the resources and the social position to lead a rebellion against the conquering Babylonians. So the ones in exile are the ones most likely to lead chants during the Olympic gold medal hockey games. They're the ones most likely to paint their faces during away games, and take their shirts off for the television.

Jeremiah is in exile too. He's in Egypt. What a bitter pill that must be. Here's God's prophet, who has urged his people and his king for years to return to right relationship with God, with the God who had brought them out of slavery in Egypt. And where does Jeremiah end up, when no one listens to him and the Babylonian army smashes Jerusalem into the dust? In Egypt.

So the guy who has no desire to be where he is writes to another set of exiles who are longing to return home. And what does he tell them? *Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease* (Jeremiah 29:5-6). He says, "Settle in. Put down roots. Cheer for the local team and paint your faces in their colors." Jeremiah, continuing in his now trademarked brand of telling the leading Israelites what they do not want to hear says, *seek the welfare of the city where [God has] sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare* (Jeremiah 29:7).

Jesus, too, is out of place. He's in the land between Samaria and Galilee (Luke 17:11), a land which doesn't technically exist, because Samaria and Galilee share a border.¹ But we know what Luke means, land that isn't completely in the one or the other. Jesus is headed for Jerusalem, and the death and betrayal that will meet him there. He's with his disciples, the twelve and the rest of the crowd that follows him. They've just asked him to increase their faith and he's just explained that it's not the size of your faith that's important. It can be as small as a mustard seed and still accomplish amazing things (Luke 17:5-6).

Jesus is out of place, taking a strange route from Galilee to Jerusalem, because Samaria isn't on the way. Plus any self-respecting Jew would steer clear of Samaria, since its people are all unbelieving outsiders who have no idea how to worship properly. Jesus is out of place and he encounters 10 lepers on the road. They may have leprosy, but they definitely have some kind of skin disease, something that others can see. The rules say that since their disease is a punishment from God, they have to stay away from everyone else until it clears up. And even when it clears up, they have to get a priest to rule that they were allowed to return to regular life.

¹ David Lose, "Commentary on Gospel: Luke 17:11-19", Working Preacher "Lectionary Commentaries for October 10, 2010, Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost", http://www.workingpreacher.org/wp_print_all.aspx?lectionary_calendar_id=162&print_type=comm&is_spanish=0 (accessed 29 June 2019)

The disciples have asked to have their faith increased and Jesus tells them it isn't the size of their faith that matters. If that was the case, no one of us would ever have enough faith.² Jesus shows the disciples what he means. He tells the ten lepers to go show themselves to the priests. Let's be clear. That's pointless. They still have leprosy. But for some reason, dare we call it their faith in Jesus of Nazareth?, they go. *And as they went, they were made clean* (Luke 17:14). Jesus doesn't heal them and send them to the priests. He sends them to the priests and their decision to take that leap of faith changes them through his mercy and love into something different. They are now healed, made clean.

In a way, this echoes the lesson from Jeremiah. Have faith in God, accept God's mercy, and get on with your life, even if you are not exactly where you want to be. You may be in Babylon, you may be sidelined with a disease that drives you out of community, but you can have faith in God and get on with your life, however far it is from your original plan.

That's a good lesson, a fine lesson. We'd all benefit from learning that lesson. But suddenly, there's an extra credit, advanced degree lesson on offer. Because one of the lepers turns around. He doesn't get to the priests and receive his all clear certificate. He turns around. Far enough away from Jesus and the disciples that the other nine lepers don't go with him. Close enough that he can still find Jesus and the crowd surrounding him.³ He throws himself in the dirt at Jesus feet and he thanks him. Jesus tells him, *get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well* (Luke 17:19).

So there's something more than "healed." There's "well." And apparently you become well, you find your welfare, to quote Jeremiah, in accepting God's mercy and giving thanks to God. Your welfare is tied up in the welfare of your community. So in this moment of tears and thanks, and a man prostrated in the dust of no man's land, let's look at the community around Jesus.

There is someone who will betray Jesus into the hands of those who will torture him to death. There are plenty of people who will fade into the crowds as he suffers humiliation and unending pain. There are the women who will be the first to return to care for his broken, dead body and who will not be believed when they say the body is missing. There is the one who will not believe in the Resurrection until he has touches Jesus' living body with his own hands. The community which surrounds this former leper who is both healed and well is made up of broken, flawed, sinful people. They wanted more faith. Jesus just showed them that they needed to act on what they had. And they needed to give thanks to God.

So let's look around this sanctuary. There are plenty of people here who are not where they planned to be in their lives. We are in exile or in some in-between land we never expected to live in. We are broken, flawed, sinful people. We all have hidden parts of ourselves where we least want to be seen and most need to be touched.⁴ Jesus, who isn't afraid of borderlands, meets

² Eugene C. Kreider, "The Politics of God: The Way to the Cross." *Word & World* 6, no. 4 (1986): 456.

³ Stan Guthrie, "The Blessing of Gratitude: Why Jesus Commands Us to Be Thankful." *Christianity Today* 54, no. 11 (2010): 47.

⁴ Meda Stamper, "Commentary on Gospel: Luke 17:11-19", Working Preacher "Lectionary Commentaries for October 13, 2013, Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost", http://www.workingpreacher.org/wp_print_all.aspx?lectionary_calendar_id=341&print_type=comm&is_spanish=0 (accessed 29 June 2019).

us there,⁵ offering us mercy and healing. We have faith, but sometimes a tiny mustard seed seems to overstate how much faith we have. We'd like some more. Particularly if we're going to be healed while we're in exile from the real life we expected to have. And here is Jeremiah saying to bloom where we find ourselves. And here is Jesus saying to accept his mercy and to give thanks. We have and we are and we will. But we'd like more.

During our stewardship campaign, we'll be hearing from different members of our community about what faith looks like to them. So let me point something out, as we begin our stewardship campaign for 2020. Look around you at the people who are a part of this community. Not only are you willing to pledge money you could readily spend for yourselves and your families to support the church and its work, your give of your time and talents. You play the piano and change the drapes at the back of the chancel, cook meals and make coffee on Sunday mornings. You help figure out how to get the most out of every penny we take in and every penny invested. You keep the lights on and the heat up. You brought a dying woman a lobster roll when that was the only thing she was hungry for. You anonymously step in when financial Armageddon has undermined someone's world. You are willing to talk through challenging disagreements that would be so much easier to walk away from. What I would ask, on this first Sunday of our stewardship campaign, is do you find anything healing or increasing your welfare when you realize that what you give and do can be a visible part of accepting God's mercy and offering God thanks? Indeed, a pledge form is something different when we realize that it is a way to show our acceptance of God's mercy and is a way of offering God thanks. This will be what faith looks like when we do it together. So now, my brothers and sisters in Christ, be assured that your faith has made you well.

⁵ Stamper.