

3 women were in a nursing home – and a new guy walks in. The 1st woman says: “So where did you move from?” “Just got out of prison.” 2nd woman: “What were you in prison for?” “I murdered my wife.” 3rd woman: “Oh – so you’re single then?”

First some background on this gospel text. The first line sets us up: “As Jesus continued His journey to Jerusalem, He traveled through Samaria and Galilee.” This is said in a specific way and for a very specific reason. The people hearing this story in Jesus’ day would have been surprised to hear that Jesus took this route. Jesus grew up in Nazareth, which was around Galilee. It was familiar territory to Him. His comfort zone, His ‘stomping ground.’ (That phrase originally referred to a place where herds of animals gathered – you get that free of charge!)

Most of Jesus’ ministry took place in the region of Galilee. But sometimes Jesus was a border walker, where those on the margins are so often found – and sometimes He walked right into what was thought to be forbidden territory, and there He sought out those that others despised or rejected. The animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans can be traced back to at least 700 years before Jesus’ birth, when the Assyrians conquered the city of Samaria. Marriage between the pagan Assyrians and the Samaritan Jews led to changes in the way that Samaritans practiced their faith. Samaritans were considered impure, heretics, sinners to be avoided at all costs. In Jesus’ day, devout Jews avoided Samaria. They deliberately planned their travel routes to go around that area, not through it.

This is a pattern throughout the gospels. Jesus went to the people and the places that everyone else avoided. Why? Because Jesus loves those whom the world rejects. He loves those who are at the margins of society; He loves the poor. Jesus’ first public sermon in His hometown synagogue, recorded by Luke in chapter 4, (Lk 4:16-30) came from the writings of the prophet Isaiah and began like this: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Jesus never hid His agenda. He didn’t care what the religious establishment said, or what would make Him popular with the crowds. He cared about bringing God’s love to everyone. And He didn’t wait for people to come to Him. No, Jesus went outside His stomping grounds, into the hinterlands to find the people who needed to see that love in the flesh. (adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, Sept – Dec 2022, p. 24-25)

Second, so what? Frequently this gospel becomes a springboard for a homily that reminds us of the disappearance of thanksgiving in daily life. It is a good sermon and a needed one. But this gospel shines some light in some of the darkened corners of our hearts.

It is no secret that America often reels under a lot of bad press in the international community. Sometimes traveling abroad we can experience hostility and distrust from the locals, or at least a jaundiced cynicism toward our country. And when we hear of this, many Americans are surprised, confused and angry. It’s not unusual to read a letter to the editor about the perceived amnesia of other countries that react to our international policy with such disgust. For example, when France criticized the United States and Great Britain for the invasion into Iraq, and voted against the action in the United Nations Security Council, many Americans cried out, “How could they forget what we did to liberate them during World War II? If it weren’t for us, they would be voting in German!” And when Iraqi citizens began to regard the United States troops as an enemy

occupying force, rather than a liberating force, we were amazed, wondering, “How could they so quickly forget the totalitarian and brutal regime of Saddam Hussein, and his 24 year reign of terror?”

And we ask, “Whatever happened to gratitude?” Jesus asked “where are the other 9?” How is it, that 10 lepers could be healed, and only one return to thank Jesus for the incredible gift of healing from that terrible disease? And we are amazed with Him. Whatever happened to gratitude, to common manners, to loyalty? – in the first century, or the 21st century, for that matter?

We have to remember that we do not know what goes on in the heart and mind of another person, and we should be careful to judge them based on our limited knowledge.

Episcopal priest Martin Bell has written a short essay on the other 9 lepers, and he imagines 9 different scenarios that might have explained the actions of those 9. He writes that one of them was so overwhelmed with joy that he simply forgot. Another was so homesick to be reunited with his family that he could think of nothing else but to rush back into their arms. Yet another was honoring a promise he made to God that if he ever received healing, the first thing he would do is volunteer his life as a missionary, telling everyone he could about the power of God. Father Bell imagines that one of the lepers simply did not return to thank Jesus because he was so obedient to what Jesus told them all to do – to go and show themselves to the priests. Anyway, we get the point. We must not be too quick to judge another person’s motives and thoughts, even when we can observe their actions. There may be compelling reasons to explain why a person makes the decisions they do. If we knew the whole situation, from within that person, we might make the same decision too. We just do not know the whole story, ever, and are therefore unqualified to judge another’s actions, or presume we know their motives.

Third, another message of this story is that it is often an outsider who can teach those of us on the inside who have been blinded by familiarity. Jesus marvels – and points out to us – that the one who returned to thank Him was a Samaritan. This surely stung those Israelites present who wanted to cling to their long-standing disdain for all things Samaritan. But Jesus was not through healing with these 10 lepers. He was also trying to heal a much more persistent and malignant spiritual leprosy that afflicts so many of us. It goes by many names – racism, national pride, elitism, nativism, self-righteousness. It is an insidious disease of the soul. And so, Jesus may not have been upset that the other 9 lepers did not return to thank Him, for they were all healed as they went away in obedience to His command. Jesus does not hand out His grace, and then wait with a grumbling spirit to see if He gets a thank-you note in the required amount of time. No, the point He seems to make is that this man kneeling at His feet was a Samaritan, and as such, there is an opportunity to use this occasion to heal the leprous bigotry that still clung to those watching the scene, and who watch it today. An outsider, outcast from social circles as a former leper, outcast from Jewish religious circles as a Samaritan, was now an insider in the circle of disciples. His acts of gratitude, of worship, of trust at the feet of Jesus could be, and should be, a shining example for any would-be apostle and disciple of Christ. But the great question remains, would the insiders be open to learn a thing or 2 about following Jesus from the outsider?

We see this scenario played out all the time in our lives too. A new convert to the faith comes into the church. They are overwhelmed by the sense of welcome, they weep during the singing of hymns, they receive the Eucharist with amazement and awe, they listen eagerly to the scriptures and their message. And as we watch them, we who often take all these mysteries so lightly are convicted, and hopefully challenged to restore our faith practices to a greater depth and sense of wonder.

Or a naturalized citizen of our country studies hard to learn about the Constitution of the United States, to learn the stories of how freedom and democracy were won and preserved throughout our history.

Then they pledge allegiance to the flag and the country for which it stands in a ceremony before a judge to receive their citizenship. Watch that person when they recite the pledge of allegiance, or place their hand over their heart at the playing of the national anthem, singing it with gusto, knowing all the words. And try to recall the last time we had a tear trickle down our face when we faced the flag. Or finally, remember a guest we invited into our home, and receive the compliments about the cooking, the admiration of the kids' art posted on the refrigerator, or played a game on the floor with our children. How long had it been since we noticed those blessings that surround us all the time? And how is it that it took an outsider to help us see them again?

Maybe we are beginning to get it. Thank you, Lord, for sending the healing we all need. Amen.
(adapted from GRACEWORKS, 9 October 2022, p 11-12)