

He was a Samaritan

A Sermon by Chuck Currie
United Church of Christ Seminarian

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Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

Samaritans are common characters in Biblical literature. We are most familiar with the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. For those of us who grew up with these texts we think of Samaritans as people willing to go out of their way to help those in need. Jesus' contemporaries would not have shared this image. For Jews of that time the Samaritans were a rival, sometimes aligned with great powers bent on the oppression of Jerusalem, and seen as the enemy.¹ Jesus saw past the differences and declared that the love of God knows no national or political boundary. It is a lesson worth reexamining in our own time when religious voices often seem intent on declaring who God doesn't love rather how God loves all that God created.

Let's talk a bit about the importance of this particular passage and what story it tells. Obviously, it is a story about the healing power of God. It is also a story about the cultural and national divisions faced by Ancient Israel. We should also remember that the passage talks about lepers. There were few groups as cursed among Jesus' contemporaries as the lepers. They were thought to be unclean and unworthy of God. Do you remember how AIDS patients were treated when that disease first emerged? How they were hated and despised, how people claimed their disease was a punishment from God, and how some sought to have them banned from public places? Lepers experienced a similar existence.

¹ The Anchor Bible Dictionary, *Samaritans*, p. 942 * V

The truth is that the time of Jesus, as different as it is from our world today, shared some common characteristics. There was great poverty and social unrest, powerful empires that ruled by taking advantage of the world's resources, religious leaders that abandoned God to align themselves with political structures, and stark divisions among the people. Jesus arrived as a powerful reminder that God's plan for humanity called for something greater than simple human suffering. The God who led God's people out of slavery and who promised peace and justice if God's people followed God's call could still achieve these things if they followed the teachings of God's child, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus preached a radical message of inclusion in which even the enemies of the Jews and the unclean were welcome in God's Empire.

It is easy for us today to think that such problems as were common in Israel then are now past us. Americans live in an increasingly pluralistic society where different cultures and belief structures are often celebrated. We can be glad of this. In a land that now has more [Muslims than Presbyterians](#) we need to be tolerant and understanding of our differences. But if we dig just a little past the surface we can see how much Jesus' welcoming of the Samaritan has to teach us today both here at home, and in the larger world.

Last summer I traveled to southern India with a group from [Eden Theological Seminary](#) to study at three different seminaries and visit with congregations that are part of the [United Church of South India](#). Indian society is divided by a strict caste system. [The Dalit people](#), people who actually rank so low as to be considered non-human by many, are forced to live in slums that are nearly indescribable.

One slum we visited in Chennai, which held hundreds of thousands on the outskirts of town, doubled as the city's garbage dump. We watched as children played in raw sewage and dug their way through heaps of garbage. In Bangalore, we visited with hundreds of people who lived on a city street next to a hospital where they were denied access because of their Dalit status. Dalit Hindus are not even allowed to worship in the same temples as other caste members.

Christians in India work alongside the Dalit people and it is there that the Jesus' theology of open table is clearly demonstrated. Churches have brought the liberating message of Jesus to the slums and the tens of millions living there are now abandoning the karma philosophy that has kept them enslaved for thousands of years. Dalit villages and slums are routinely destroyed and their people killed and church workers have faced the wrath of a fundamentalist Hindu government who saw liberation as a threat to their hold on power. Voters threw out that government in recent elections and church leaders now feel more secure. The most important test Christians there now face is how to further their fight for justice without resorting to a message of violence themselves. Our

churches cannot simply replace one system of domination with another. We have to embrace the same values of pluralism and non-violence that Jesus did.

Here in the United States we have had similar problems. One can easily draw parallels between the Dalit condition and that of how African–Americans have historically been treated. It is not much a stretch to say that homeless Americans are our own domestic version of the untouchables.

Before coming to seminary I worked for about 17 years with programs that addressed issues of homelessness.

The first shelter I worked at once conducted an experiment to chronicle the different ways homeless people are treated compared to those of greater means.

On a downtown city side we parked a van that contained a hidden camera. One of the residents of our shelter, dressed in donated clothing from our clothing room, got out of the van and collapsed on the sidewalk. People literally stepped over him. People walked past. People averted their eyes. This man became invisible to people – many of who you would suspect are Christians – because of his poverty.

You can guess how the story ends. The man got up and returned to the van and changed into a business suit. He got back out of the van and once again collapsed on the sidewalk. People rushed to his aid. He was no longer invisible. He was no longer a stranger. He was no longer the foreign Samaritan.

What Jesus teaches in this passage and in others is that the human differences and distinctions we draw are irrelevant to God. God heals all and loves all.

But do we really believe that? Theoretically we can say of course we believe that God loves everyone. But does God love our enemies? Would God heal our enemies without even asking a question or two about their intentions? Jesus healed the Samaritan – the foreigner, the enemy – and I would suggest that God would do the same to those who oppose us.

How should we respond to this as Americans? Well, The Rev. William Sloane Coffin once said (quoting Pablo Casals):

Love of country is a wonderful thing, but why should love stop at the border?²

There is another part of this passage that is surely worth considering. It is assumed that all of the lepers healed by Jesus – with the exception of the Samaritan – were Jews like Jesus. Once healed they must have returned to their communities thrilled to be well and finally free of the social outcaste status their

² William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*, p. 80.

disease conferred on them. But it was only the Samaritan who returned and gave thanks to God. He would still have been a social outcaste.

Kari Jo Verhulst wrote about this story once in the Christian magazine *Sojourners*:

What of the other nine? By implication, they were Jews, and so had less to stop them from returning to Jesus. It is possible that they moved back into Jewish society as quickly as they could, leaving this painful chapter of their lives behind. Safely returned, the indignity of being cast out became a distant memory and they assumed the privileges of their social standing once again.

The word "foreigner" in verse 18 is the same word that appeared on the "keep out" signs on the inner barrier of the temple. This was to preserve the sanctity of the temple and prevent it from being defiled. Lepers and Samaritans alike were a threat to the purity. Jesus issued a new code of purity—one that understood holiness to come from the heart; one that demanded the inclusion of all of God's children.³

Last week we remembered World Communion Sunday and in churches from Missouri to Bangalore we drank from the cup and ate the bread in celebration of our common faith. We remember that in reading these Bible stories that "God is Still Speaking" to us and those lessons preached then have value for us now.

He was a Samaritan. God didn't care.

Who are the Samaritans we exclude from our religious life and civil society today? Are we open and affirming of all? Do we fully challenge ourselves to live by the Word or are we willing to accept the status quo. I won't answer that question for any of you but I will try and answer honestly for myself. There are times when it is easier to look the other way and take the safer route. I have to remind myself that being Christian isn't about playing it safe. Being Christian is about taking the risks God asks of us. We must examine our own response and to thank God with praise for telling us to ask the question and for sending Jesus to tell us that the open table is the only table that God wants us to set.

Amen.

³ Kari Jo Verhulst, [An Invitation to Live](#), Internet.