

Redrawing Boundaries

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Texts: Luke 17: 11-19

Our scripture reading this morning begins at a boundary. Jesus and his disciples are journeying through the region between Samaria and Galilee. Then we hear that he is at a secondary boundary, the entrance to a village. From this place, this borderland, he is addressed by ten men who maintain their own boundary with him – social distancing, we could say, a far more familiar experience to us now than it would have been six years ago – because of their skin disease. They cry out to Jesus for mercy, and he tells them to go see the priests – this being the typical protocol for being able to return to Jewish community after an experience of such a disease. They turn away – maintaining their distance to Jesus as they do – and as they go, they are healed: a miracle.

This could easily be the end of the story, and yet, it isn't. The narrative continues to tell us that, out of these ten men, one turns back. Noticing his healing, being filled with gratitude, he turns back and prostrates himself at Jesus' feet – suddenly, the carefully maintained boundary from the beginning of the passage has been crossed as this man was propelled forward by his praise for God. Jesus wonders at the fact that only this man, out of the ten has come back. He then blesses him, saying "your faith has made you well." Our translation undermines some of the strength of the verb here; what's rendered as "made you well" is the verb σώζω (sodzo) which means to save, as in to deliver out of danger into safety. This verb not only mends bodies but reinstates them into community and vocation. This man, who has crossed the boundary to come back to Jesus, has not only been healed but been saved.

What are we to make of all these boundaries and this ultimate moment of boundary crossing? In order to understand, we need to look closely at who crosses which boundaries, who doesn't and what's at stake in those choices.

It is not just any man that comes back. In fact, the identity of this man is in some sense the climax of the story, more surprising than even the miracle itself. This one man, who was so moved by his experience of grace and healing as to run up to Jesus and fall down in gratitude, this man is a

Samaritan.

The Samaritans were a group of people who lived, unsurprisingly, in Samaria. But the distinction is much more significant than geography. The Samaritans were Israelites who had long ago intermarried with Assyrians during the period of exile. They had their own unique version of the Pentateuch – the five books of Moses – and their own temple on a place called Mt. Gerizim, not in Jerusalem. During Jesus' time, Samaritans and Jewish people viewed each other with contempt, each considering the other illegitimate in their religious beliefs. This prejudice is what gives the more famous story from Luke's gospel, The Good Samaritan, such weight: that the Samaritan would view a Jewish man on the side of the road as his neighbor was remarkable to Jesus' listeners, driving home the fact that what would be expected would be animosity.

So within this context we can recognize that the one single man who comes back to praise God is the one whom you would least expect, if you held the prejudices of the day. Although his status as a Samaritan and also as one with a skin disease would keep him doubly apart from someone like Jesus, here he is, at Jesus' feet. And despite their deeply entrenched differences, Jesus blesses him. This is characteristic of Jesus, who is not held back by bias but instead crosses social boundaries again and again – of health status, ethnicity, gender – his mission is for all, bar none. What Jesus values is not the ethnic or even religious status of this man, but that he recognizes God's love before him and he rejoices in it.

But there are nine other players in this story. What can we learn from the men who walked away? I admit, when I read this story I feel defensive over those men. Jesus asks, "where are the other nine?" and I want to say, "we know where they are, Jesus! They're on their way to show themselves to the priests, just like you told them to." They are following the rules, taking the necessary steps to be returned to society and to get back as quickly as possible to life among their communities. I feel defensive of them because I relate to them. Getting "back to normal" is so deeply alluring. And yet, normal also includes the normalization of the social boundaries and prejudices that separate the Jews and the Samaritans. It means getting to be back on the inside, and to enjoy the privileges of that location, while reinforcing the boundaries that keep others on the outside.

While they were on their way to get back to normal, none of the nine men noticed that the Samaritan man turned back. Or, if they did notice, they chose not to join him. Despite the fact that they had all held the status of outsiders as people with a skin disease, the boundaries of bias still stood firm. They did not see a kinship with him. They had no solidarity with him. And because they could not see themselves as having a kinship with him, they miss it. They miss the valuable example that he sets of how to respond to God's love.

I want to make clear that I don't think the Samaritan man was more able to respond to God's love because he was a Samaritan. To do so would run the risk of stereotyping him in a different, but ultimately still reductive, way. Instead, I want to emphasize that this one man was able to instantly recognize God's love and mercy and he was a Samaritan. But the prejudices and assumptions associated with the latter kept the other nine from seeing the fact of the former. They miss the fact that this man, whom they would have thought did not even know God, was the one who crossed boundaries to meet Him.

When we let the boundaries of our biases, prejudices, and assumptions stand unquestioned, we run the same risk as the nine of this story. The degree to which we can understand ourselves as having a kinship with others has direct implications for how able we are to recognize the presence of God's love that is in front of us.

This story takes on a different resonance for me during Indigenous People's Day weekend as I consider the history of violent boundary making that is inherent to settler-colonialism. The act of parceling out land as settlers arrived quite literally involved drawing boundaries where they had previously not existed, imposing a new relationship of land ownership in place of the relationship of land stewardship that indigenous people had cultivated for millennia. The colonists, too, had specific ideas about who could know God and who couldn't. As we named in our land acknowledgement, Christian doctrine provided the theological basis for what would become the genocide of indigenous peoples. Next year we will mark the 250th anniversary of the founding of this nation and in five years the 400th anniversary of this city – these markers of time form yet another boundary, where we mark the “first” of something, seeming to indicate a fresh start, a blank slate, without naming those for whom that “first” was really the beginning of a “last.” We live today with the ongoing legacy of these destructive, death-dealing boundaries.

But although these boundaries have defined our past they need not define our future.

Members of this community are engaging deeply with what the next steps for this congregation will be. Even now we have the opportunity to redraw boundaries that encompass those with whom we think we share the least. We can, like Jesus, approach others from a place of authentic relationship, not one of hierarchical superiority. We should be careful that we do not replicate hierarchy in the guise of charity, of reducing others down to only their oppression. I think of the words attributed to a group of Aboriginal rights activists from Queensland, Australia: “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” The lesson of solidarity from the men who did not turn around is not that they needed to help the Samaritan or make him more like them, but that they had something valuable to learn from his example as a person. In the end, the real boundary in this story is not between Samaritan and Jew, or sick and well – it is between those who are willing to cross boundaries to rejoice in the presence of God’s love, and those who are not. May we all be so willing. Amen.

