

2 Kings 5:1-19

Luke 17:11-19

June 5, 2016

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

On the Road with Jesus
AT THE BORDER

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“The great American road trip is back.”

That’s how an article from AAA dated May 19 begins, with predictions of record setting travel numbers for last weekend’s Memorial Day holiday. According to AAA predictions, “more than 38 million Americans will travel this Memorial Day weekend. That is the second-highest Memorial Day travel volume on record and the most since 2005. AAA President and CEO Marshall Doney said, “Americans are eagerly awaiting the start of summer and are ready to travel in numbers not seen in more than a decade. The great American road trip is officially back thanks to low gas prices, and millions of people from coast to coast are ready to kick off summer with a Memorial Day getaway.”¹

I’d like to invite you to take a different kind of “road trip” this summer. Let’s call it “the great Gospel road trip.” In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is always on the move around Galilee and beyond in regions to the north. In fact, geography and travel help determine the outline of Luke’s gospel, especially in the middle ten or so chapters. At the end of chapter 9, we read, “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” With this sentence, Luke sets a geographical framework for the rest of his gospel — Jesus is up north in Galilee; he is headed south to Jerusalem. But Luke also sets a theological framework within the geography — “When the days drew near for him to be taken up . . .” — that means when Jesus finally reaches Jerusalem, he will die. Ten chapters later, in the middle of chapter 19, we read, “After he said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.” Then Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey for his final week.

In the meantime, it takes Jesus quite a while to get from Galilee to Jerusalem. As the crow flies, it is about 80 miles from Capernaum in Galilee (Jesus’ headquarters on the shore of the Sea of Galilee) to Jerusalem in Judea (the religious center of Jewish life). Even at a walking rate of 3 miles per hour for 8 hours a day, it would only take a little more than 3 days to make the trip. But Jesus meanders all over the place as he makes his way north to south on his road trip. Along the way he meets all sorts of people. He teaches and preaches and heals and is accepted and is rejected. Still, Jesus makes his way “on the road” to Jerusalem.

There is a preaching schedule in today’s bulletin for the next two months. Our road trip with Jesus is going to take us beyond the bounds of chapters 9 - 19. Over the next few weeks we will encounter lots of different people in lots of different places.

Jesus is going to take us to some surprising places, maybe even to some places we'd rather not go. But, as always, we hear Jesus call to us, "Follow me!"

As I planned my preaching for June and July, I also looked up many hymns to use with the different scripture texts. I gave Karla and Vera copies of the preaching schedule so they would know what to expect. I haven't talked with Karla yet about upcoming music, so I don't know if she's going to have the choir sing Willie Nelson's "On the Road Again" for an anthem one Sunday. But some of Willie's lyrics are actually pretty helpful as we set out to follow Jesus "on the road" — "On the road again, Just can't wait to get on the road again, Goin' places that I've never been, Seein' things that I may never see again."

Today we jump right into the middle of the road trip in Luke 17. As Luke tells us, "On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee." Remember how I said that it was about 80 miles as the crow flies from Capernaum in the north to Jerusalem in the south? Well, that's assuming you could walk a straight path from one place to the other. In reality, geography won't let you do that, so you do have to meander a bit. However, in Jesus' day, there were even greater obstacles than geography that got in the way of taking a direct route from Galilee to Judea.

Faithful, observant Jews traveling south from Galilee would have detoured to the east and traveled along the east bank of the Jordan River until they could safely cross over into the southern region of Judea and begin their ascent to Jerusalem. This route was determined far more by racial and religious prejudice and animosity than by geography. Jews and Samaritans didn't associate with one another. In fact, they avoided one another if at all possible. Although they shared a common heritage in their ancestor Jacob, the Jews regarded the Samaritans as foreigners. Their differences had to do with right worship, ritual purity, and religious practices, despite their common heritage.

So, it's somewhat surprising to find Jesus here at the border between Samaria and Galilee. Perhaps Luke is simply giving us one more geographical marker along the way. However, considering what happens in this story, Luke may have had a greater theological purpose in mind when he located Jesus at the border. He is neither in Galilee nor in Samaria — or, we might say, he is in both places at once. The geography is a little bit ambiguous. And maybe that's the way it should be. What is Jesus going to do? Will he detour to the east and avoid the dreaded Samaritans? Or will he stay on the road and go where it takes him and us?

This "in-between place," this "no-man's land," this Palestinian "DMZ" reminded me of what some people called "liminal spaces." The ancient Celts called them "thin places." The poem by Sharlande Sledge in the margin next to this morning's Opening Sentences describes well these thin places:

“Thin places,” the Celts call this space,
Both seen and unseen,
Where the door between the world
And the next is cracked open for a moment
And the light is not all on the other side.
God shaped space. Holy.

“Thin places” are those rare locales where the distance between heaven and Earth collapses. They are “in-between spaces” where you find that you encounter God up close and personal. For some people, Montreat is a thin place. For others, it’s watching a gorgeous sunrise at the beach. Maybe it’s looking into the eyes of your newborn child. It could be holding a lighted candle at the Christmas Eve communion service. It could be at the bedside of a dying loved one. Many times you find yourself in a “thin place” when you didn’t even mean to go there.

This story about Jesus and the ten lepers in “the region between Samaria and Galilee” strikes me a story about being in a thin place. The lepers were already living in an “in-between” place because of their skin malady. They were outcast — socially, religiously, and physically. They literally didn’t belong anywhere any more — except with each other there in the borderlands. And here, on the road at the border, Jesus is about to cross another boundary — a social boundary, written in stone — as he actually takes the time to interact with these ten lepers.

By law, by tradition, by religion, by personal comfort level, Jesus should have avoided the lepers at all costs. But he didn’t — he didn’t take another road to avoid them. And, when he crossed the boundary there at the border, the lives of ten men changed. “When Jesus saw them, he said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’ And as they went, they were made clean.” (Luke 17:14)

Then the story’s focus zooms in on one of the men — “Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.” What a wonderful, touching scene! Before we criticize the other nine too harshly, let it be said that they did exactly what Jesus commanded them to do. But this one man out of ten found something even more than physical cleansing that day. “He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him.” Then Luke drives home the surprising point — **“And he was a Samaritan.”**

This guy had two strikes against him — he was a leper AND he was a Samaritan. But that doesn’t matter to Jesus. He didn’t add to the man’s isolation by saying something like, “I’ll heal you nine Jews, but I can’t associate with you Samaritan!” There has to be some theological significance to the fact that Luke doesn’t reveal the man’s Samaritan heritage until **after** he has been cleansed and praised God and laid himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. When the Samaritan leper bowed at Jesus’ feet and praised God and thanked Jesus for cleansing him, “the distance between heaven and Earth collapsed.”

We live in a time and in a country where borders are much on our minds, much in the news, and much in the politics of the day — where “the other, the foreigner” is automatically seen as a threat. Imagine how the Jews of Luke’s day heard the story about the **Samaritan leper** being the only one who returned to glorify, praise, and thank God. The Jews of Jesus’ day weren’t too happy when they heard about God’s mercy and grace and healing powers were given to the Gentiles. Harriet read an Old Testament story about an army commander named Namaan who was cured of his leprosy by the Lord God. When Jesus preached a sermon in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth among his neighbors, they were none too happy when he used for an illustration this story about a Gentile army commander receiving God’s blessings and healing. And yet, as the Old Testament story tells us, Namaan was so thankful to God that he took some dirt home so he could worship, remember, and thank the God who was graceful to him.

On this first leg of the journey on the road with Jesus, Jesus takes us into territory we might just as well avoid traveling through. We’re not faithful Jews trying to avoid the Samaritans, but we’re all too familiar with the question of “the other, the foreigner.” This story has two surprising twists. First, the man who turned back had not one, but two strikes against him that should have counted him out of God’s grace and contact with Jesus. Second, the man who turned back and thanked Jesus found Jesus that day. As one person has put it, in leper colonies the common problem of leprosy made the Jewish/Samaritan distinctions unimportant — and being in the presence of Jesus made those distinctions, and any others, just as unimportant.

We may not be Jews and Samaritans, we may not be physically clean and leprous, but we still isolate “the other” when, in fact, in Jesus’ presence we are all the same, sinners in need of God’s healing grace and salvation. All ten of the lepers were made clean. All ten of the lepers were healed. But only the one who turned back and said “Thank you” was called “saved.” Don’t you love Anne Lamott’s comment that her two favorite prayers are, in the morning, “Help me. Help me. Help me.” and at bedtime, “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”?

As we go along “on the road with Jesus,” we may wish sometimes that our spiritual GPS would “recalculate, recalculate” when we see where Jesus is calling us to follow him. But if we follow him on the road, we very well will find ourselves in those “thin places” where “the distance between heaven and Earth collapses,” “goin’ places that we’ve never been, Seein’ things that we may never see again.”

Let us pray: We thank you, O God, for your love for us — love that reaches out to accept us, wherever we are, whoever we are — love that reassures, prompts, challenges, and overwhelms us. Help us who are held within the security of your love to risk showing that same love to others. May our love, grounded in your love in Jesus Christ, be known for its abundance and its healing. Amen.

NOTES

¹ “AAA: More than 38 Million Americans Expected to Travel This Memorial Day Weekend,” at www.newsroom.aaa.com.