

Birds of a Feather

**A sermon by Rev. Dr. Gregory Young
Presented on Sunday, October 10, 2010**

Sermon Prayer:

Let us pray. Gracious God, it is always a good thing to gather in your house to praise your holy name and to have your word shape our life together as a congregation. And so as we praise you today we pray that you will speak to us the words of life that we may truly live as your children and be living witnesses to the Good News that you offer to all in your son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Sermon:

Someone asked me before we gathered, they actually just looked at me quizzically and said, "Birds of a feather?" I don't like sermon titles. You just need to know that right away. It's always a struggle to come up with a creative catchy sermon title. Anyway, I think this title does capture a little bit of where I'm at with this Gospel reading today about the ten lepers that Jesus encountered in this region between Galilee and Samaria.

Adverse circumstances bring people together who otherwise would never come together. Take for instance a plane crash or maybe that plane that made the emergency landing on the Hudson River. Suddenly a group of people find themselves thrust together in a situation where they need one another to survive. Think about the recent earthquakes in Haiti and Chile and how people who had lost everything needed to depend upon one another and the community of the world to help restore life and to help to rebuild. People who normally would never have come together finally find themselves brought together because of circumstances or crisis or even illness. Think of those who suffer because of HIV/Aids. It knows no socio or economic boundary. It knows no racial boundary or cultural boundary. And those who are living with HIV/AIDS find themselves in a special community of their own holding on to life and hoping that a cure might be found.

Those who once found themselves at odds or on opposite ends of the socio-economic spectrum suddenly find themselves thrust together in times of crisis or dire need. All of this

happens because of a shared experience that causes those affected to find support and understanding from those sharing the same experience. Have you ever said to someone who was grieving the loss of a loved one, "I know how you feel?" Only to have them come back and say, "No, you don't." And yet those who have lived through that experience do know and find support and care from one another in grief support groups.

Think for instance of the homeless. To us the homeless are simply that, persons and families who live without homes. Seldom do we stop to think of the homeless as a potentially divided group: drug and alcohol abusers, those suffering from mental illness, abandoned children, and families living through the nightmare of eviction or foreclosure. It is the fact that all of these and others share the common circumstance of homelessness that allows us to identify them as one group. It is also the shared and common experience of homelessness that brings these people together in their affliction.

In our Gospel reading today we hear of 10 lepers who had found and created a community of mutual support in the midst of their affliction. At the beginning of the story we look at these ten men as we would see any group sharing the same affliction. They could have been wounded warriors returning from Afghanistan or prisoners cleaning up one of our roadsides or people fighting cancer in one of our hospitals or Haitians trying to rebuild after the devastating earthquake. These 10 men shared the common affliction of leprosy and the stigma of being social outcasts due to their affliction. These two circumstances brought these men together to form a community that would offer support for one another and protection for one another.

It is this community of 10 lepers that Jesus finds himself standing before in this story. The writer of Luke tells us that Jesus is in the region between Galilee and Samaria. And yesterday, we heard from Bishop Riley that this region actually does not exist. It's not a real place. But Bishop Riley pointed out that it is the place between places. The southern border of Galilee forms the northern border of Samaria. And the northern border of Samaria forms the southern border of Galilee. In the days of Jesus Galilee was considered to be so far away from Jerusalem that one could lose their Jewish identity there because there were so many other influences, cultural and religious, vying for people's attention. It was the northern territory and had been greatly influenced by other cultures.

Samaria was the big stretch of land that separated Galilee from the southern part of Israel including the center of Jewish life, Jerusalem. And the Samaritans who lived in Samaria were considered by the good Jews of Jesus' day as being outcasts – social and religious outcasts; those who generations before had abandoned the true faith of Israel and the laws of Israel and had corrupted the faith by intermarrying with pagans. Any good Jew traveling from Jerusalem or the southern part of this kingdom to the northern territory of Galilee would never travel directly through Samaria. They would go days out of their way; miles out of their way to go around Samaria so as not to pollute themselves with the Samaritan culture. The Samaritans were considered to be unclean and on the same social tier as Gentiles. And so, good Jews in Jesus' day would have nothing to do with Samaritans.

Jesus found himself on the border between Galilee and Samaria, between Jews and Samaritans. The writer of this Gospel is telling us that Jesus is in a place that was considered by many to be a sort of no-mans-land; a demilitarized zone that was created out of fear to keep a safe distance between Jewish society and Samaritan society. As long as one was on either side of this neutral zone one was considered safe and secure and pure. But we all know that Jesus did not always take the safe routes. In one instance he riled up his home town to the point where they wanted to throw him off a cliff. In another story we hear how Jesus actually travelled through Samaria and changed the lives of a community of Samaritans in that so-called God-forsaken place of Samaria. Jesus challenged the authorities and the norms of his Jewish culture with a new understanding of community; a new understanding that he called the kingdom of God and this story today is no exception to the challenge that he brings to his society and to us today.

First, any good Jew understood that you do not talk to lepers and you keep your distance from them. Lepers were required to wear bells and to cry out "Leper, Leper" so that all would know to keep their distance. The only way lepers could survive was on the mercy of others; they could not be employed. They could not provide for themselves and so the only way they could survive was if others had mercy on them. And so, as Jesus approached the village in this story, still on the outskirts of the community – he's not yet in the community but he's approaching it. He runs into this community of 10 lepers living on the edge of society; outcasts from that village and he hears them cry out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." For years they had cried these same words to

countless individuals who had approached the village hoping for a morsel of food or a cool drink of water. Jesus, Master, to these 10 men everyone who passed by was Master because they had no social standing. Everyone who passed by was Master. But they cried his name, Jesus. They must have heard stories about him. They must of heard about his healings, about the mercy Jesus had shown to those society had forgotten, the good news of a new community that was open to all, God's community where God's justice reigned supreme and not human justice. If this Jesus is the savior maybe he can save us. "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."

In this story we never hear that Jesus actually touched these lepers; in fact it appears that he is only close enough to them to give them this instruction, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." Now we have to remember something at this point. Jesus is in southern Galilee; there is this large expanse of Samaria between where Jesus is and where the priests are in Jerusalem. It's a long distance. And Jesus tells this struggling band of 10 lepers to go show themselves to the priests; to go to the Temple in Jerusalem and present themselves that they might be declared clean of their leprosy and now able to function in Jewish society as full participating members of that society. Jesus does not say to them you are healed, go on your way. All he tells the 10 lepers to do is to get the stamp of approval from the priests that they have been healed and can now re-enter Jewish society with the stigma of leprosy removed. The 10 lepers amazingly follow Jesus' instruction - complete trust in his word - and they begin the long journey to Jerusalem.

It is there on that journey to the temple. That journey of faith and hope that each one of the members of this leper community were holding onto that they might be restored; it's there in their journey that they suddenly realize they've been healed; they've been cleansed of their leprosy. And suddenly, the thing that had brought these 10 men together was gone; it was gone. The leprosy had formed a community of them; the leprosy now is healed and their community is suddenly challenged with a new reality.

We learn later in the story one of the ten is a Samaritan; one Samaritan traveling to Jerusalem with a group of nine Jewish men to present themselves to the priests. The Samaritan could not be healed of his ethnic heritage. And he knew that if he were to continue on this journey with the other nine that were part of his life community; he knew that when he got to the temple he would be turned away because he was a Samaritan. He could

not present himself to the priests for if he did that the priests would have declared, "You are Samaritan, you are still unclean. You do not belong here. Get back to your God-forsaken home of Samaria. And don't ever cross the border again." That's why the man turned back. Where would he go? If he went back to his village in Samaria, he's been in Jewish territory for so long and he had community with nine other Jewish men his own people would've turned him out for having sold out to the Jews. He had no where to turn except to the one who he knew in his heart had brought the healing hand of God into his life and so he went back to Jesus.

He went back to Jesus; he prostrated himself on the ground and he thanked and praised God. And a deeper healing was offered to him in that moment. For Jesus did not look at him and say, "You Samaritan get up." He saw him as a human being, as good as any other human being, standing before God and praising God's holy name. Jesus, Master, Son of God, Savior seeks to heal a deeper wound. He seeks to heal the wounds and the scars and the fears that keep us in isolation of our cultures and societies; the things that keep us at arms length – the fears, the suspicions, the doubts, the prejudices. He seeks to heal the soul of the human heart.

He asks the Samaritan "Were not ten made clean? Where are the other nine?" The true miracle of healing that Jesus offered was not skin deep, it wasn't just leprosy, but sought to bring healing to the very soul. Were not 10 healed, where are the other nine? They were so intent on getting their certificate of restoration from the priests that the other nine had forgotten about their comrade and their friend. They saw him walking off from their community and they let him go. They knew in that moment that if all 10 had gone to Jerusalem that one would have not been accepted and would've been kicked out of town; would've been kicked back to his God-forsaken country and they let him go alone. They missed the whole point of the healing. The healing was to find a deeper sense of community; it was to find human community that knows no barriers, that knows no bounds but sees the value of one that the rest of the world looks at and devalues. They let him go alone. They let him go alone and the shame of it is the nine missed the true healing. And the one received it.

Why are you in church today? Why have you come here? Maybe there's a problem in your life; maybe there's a hurt; maybe it's a very serious illness that you're facing and you're just hoping to get some peace. You're hoping to draw near to God. Don't miss the deeper

healing that God and Jesus Christ offer you today. The deeper healing of community that no matter what life throws at us we can be together. We can draw strength from one another. We can hold on to each other and journey through life together as a healed people. The nine missed the blessing, don't be among the nine; stand with the one. And know this day that Jesus is not just your healer, he is not just your Master, he is your savior for eternity. And the eternal journey begins right now as we journey together.

All thanks and praise be to God. To him be the glory. Amen.