

THE GOSPEL OUTSIDE - HEALING AT THE BORDER

Lent

Luke 17:11-19

A Sermon Preached by
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University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture – Read by Liturgists
Listen for the word of God.

Luke 17:11-19¹

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's 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."

Rev. David Vásquez-Levy²

Trying to find my way around here, away from the light [streaming through the window]. ... I mean, it is powerful to be able to preach when the clouds have parted and the light is right on you, but then I can't see you. So we will try to move to ... although then I find another light... Well, we'll stay here, anyway. I'm sure the light will change.

Good morning! [*Good morning!*] Good morning church! [*Good morning!*]

It is good to be here this morning and to be with you. I am grateful to Pastor Catherine, Pastor Peter, and Pastor Amy for the opportunity to be with you over this weekend. To be able to be part of the lecture series has been really a great gift and opportunity. I'm especially grateful because it's given me the chance to be able to begin a series of conversations across the country with various elected officials. We began on Friday with a conversation with your attorney general here in Washington, Bob Ferguson, to try to engage in how we think differently and talk differently about our current immigration reality, not just in the United States but globally. So I'm grateful for that opportunity.

On Friday morning I had a chance to visit with Bob Fitzgerald, A member of this congregation, who it was the founder of this Lecture Series or, he will argue strongly, a co-founder of the Lecture Series.

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New Testament. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. .

² The Rev. Dr. David Vásquez-Levy serves as President of Pacific School of Religion, leading at the intersection of faith, higher education and social change. He came as speaker for the UCUC Lecture Series.

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And I'm really proud that Bob is our alum. So that embodies, I think, precisely the kind of work that the lecture is about. Bob said that the Lecture Series came about in the recognition that there is a gap between what's happening in theological education in seminary and what is often preached and talked about in congregations, so that this congregation University Congregational has made a commitment to seek ways to bridge that gap. It's really significant. The level of change and challenge and opportunity all around us and in the world today requires us to do some homework. It requires us not to simply ship off people to do theological education and then come back already to go and tell us in 13 minutes on Sunday morning how to live our lives, but rather to find ways in which we all tend to this opportunity, to think about how Scripture, how our theological reflection can help us reframe the way we think about the world and our life and in it. So I'm grateful for the partnership with the congregation embodied in so many ways.

We are proud of Amy who is also ... – Pastor Amy – who is also one, one of our alums, for the opportunity that this congregation has had to shape the life of many who have pursued ministry to whom I've gotten the chance to talk with this morning. Again PSR alums – we have a theme going on here: Kathleen Morgan and Meighan Pritchard and the ministries that they have engaged in, compelled by, identified by, called by this community to be able to pursue a call to ministry in that way. So I hope that in our conversations over this weekend and in our reflections this morning that you will be attentive to what will bridge the gap between the necessary reflection, theological reflection we must do, both in the preparation of leaders for the church and the society but also in our own preparation for ministry. Perhaps in our conversations you will be sparked to think about someone in this community who like Amy, who like [Catherine], like Pastor Peter, and Meigan and Kathleen have known themselves to be called to a particular form of ministry, but to be attentive to how God may be calling you as well, to think about the importance of the world we live in and how our faith, our tradition, our Scriptures may help inform the way we live.

Please join me in a word of prayer.

May the words of my mouth
And the meditation of our hearts
Be acceptable to you our God and our Redeemer.
- Amen

One morning last fall when I was dropping my daughter off at school – my daughter is 12 years old – one of her friends saw her from way across the schoolyard and shouted at the top of her lungs, "MEHERET!" That's is my daughter's name, Meheret. And they ran to each other and gave each other a big hug. They just spent the evening before together; but you would think they hadn't seen each other for years. Catherine, Amy, and Peter, I think I would recommend that University Congregational Church change the greeting of the Peace into this model. Right? So you would run to each other and be like "BETTY!" "PETER!" That would say things differently and start Sunday morning worship with a different energy, wouldn't it?

To have a sense of belonging, of homecoming. Homecomings can be great. "NORM!" shouted the faithful of the bar in the TV series "Cheers."

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Sometimes you want to come
Wherever anybody knows your name,
And they're always glad you came;
You want to be where you can see,
Our troubles are all the same;
You want to be where everybody knows your name.³

Homecoming can be joyful. To know that our troubles are all the same, that we want to be where everybody knows our name. But joyful as they are, homecomings are not without complications. Every couple of years I make my way back home to Guatemala where I'm originally from to visit my family. I just did a couple of weeks ago. Every time I prepare to go back home to Guatemala to be with my mom, however, I need to make, to tend to some things, because the homecoming is joyful but there's always something to tend to. I have to make a run to Target, because I have to buy a brand-new set of white socks, if I have any, because – or my T-shirts, white T-shirts – because no matter what I do even though I've been away from home for over 30 years I can't get them white enough for my mother! So it's easier to just buy a new set.

Unfortunately not all the complications with homecoming are so easily addressed as a trip to @Target.⁴ Sometimes there are difficulties in relationships, great changes. My father passed away five years ago and my brother a year later, so homecoming can be difficult. Homecoming can be difficult about where we each are as we reengage each other about our grief around that. Homecomings can be difficult, because in a family as large as mine – there are eight of us, eight children – there are a few complications: not everybody can be in the room at the same time without things starting to bubble up.

Today where the largest number of people on the move in the history of the world. People are on the move both for reasons of crisis: refugees, displacement. But people are also on the move because of opportunity, of jobs – and so that the sense of home is shifting as to where it is. So coming home is becoming complex and for some impossible. The commute home for Dreamers and their families – after school or after work – that coming home can be very difficult because they don't know if they will make it home or might be detained on the way home because of a busted taillight, because of something else of the have done, and that journey home may be truncated and end up in a deportation. What would that homecoming be like for somebody who sacrificed so much to come across the world to be deported and return home?

What home means is shifting. Our ability to return home can be complex. The growing numbers of homelessness, the vast majority ... the vast movement of people around the world is expressed not only in the displacement of refugees or corporate opportunities for work. It is also expressed in the growing numbers of homeless people in our streets right across the street from us. As the idea of homecoming is complicated.

Coming home for somebody who has been battling a war in either Iraq or Afghanistan that we've forgotten about and yet is still ongoing and we send them to serve. What is it like to come home to a

³ "Where Everybody Knows Your Name," by Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart Angelo ©1982. Words verified 4/19/2018 at www.buzzfeed.com.

⁴ @Target is a department store of modest prices.

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nation that's demanded so much of you but is not tracking on the fact that this is shaping your life? Coming home is a gift but it can be complicated.

What was the homecoming like for the lepers in the story we heard of Jesus? See, in the reading from Chapter 17 of Luke, Jesus is on a journey to Jerusalem. He is, as he often is, on a border state. He is in the line between Samaria and Galilee out on a boundary. And out there is in the margins of society, is where these lepers are forced to live, because lepers were not allowed to be in the camp in the city out of fear of their disease, and so they are forced to live on the margin. Jesus runs across 10 of these lepers who are not only living on a boundary, on a border, on a margin, but are marginalized from their own societies and communities. As they are healed in the story what would their homecoming be like when they tried to reenter the society?

Leviticus 13 gives us a glimpse about the type of life that these folks would have lived. It commands that the person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothing and let the hair on his head be disheveled. They must express physically, so everybody is aware of their disease and not approach them.⁵ And he shall cover his upper lip and cry out 'Unclean! Unclean!' so that as people approached them they shall warn them that they are diseased and cannot be approached. He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone, says the text. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.

So keeping their distance because they knew the law. These lepers yell out to Jesus from a distance, "Jesus, son of David, Master. Have mercy on us." Accustomed to begging for their very subsistence, theirs was likely a desperate cry without hope. I don't know that they really expect anything to happen, because like homeless folks around us, their calls are likely to go ignored. There's too many. It's too complex.

And Jesus gives them this bizarre answer, "Go show yourselves to the priest," is all that they get from him. Is that where they're going when they leave Jesus? Are they going back to show themselves to the priest? When they are healed as they make their way away from Jesus, they are blown away by the fact that something has *actually* happened. But where are they going? Are they planning, as Jesus says, to go show yourself to the priest on actually going to do that? Or are they just walking away disappointed that nothing is going to happen. Whatever it is that they are doing, going back in disappointment or obediently heading over to the priest, they are healed as they are walking. For the first time since they contracted this dreaded disease, they could act out of that deep longing to go home. They hadn't been able to approach their communities to return home, but now all of a sudden they are healed and for the first time they can actually go home. Having lived excluded, alone, and at a distance, could they even find their way home anymore? The disease may have destroyed everything they had – their relationships, their economic ability. Do they even have a home to go back to?

Now nine of the ten lepers who encounter Jesus in that border town may have tried to make their journey home by going first as instructed to the priest, because what the Law required when Jesus said to them, "Go show yourself to the priest," was that the Law required that once a leper had been healed, they needed to be certified by the priest before they could reenter society." So nine of them,

⁵ Holy Bible NSRV (op cit) Old Testament Leviticus 13:45.

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maybe that's why they didn't come back. Maybe they did actually go to the priest, were certified clean and tried to find their way home.

But for one of them, the Samaritan, that is not a choice. See, the Samaritan is not allowed to enter the temple because he is an outsider. He doesn't have papers to enter the temple. And the Samaritan cannot do as the others do, return to a solid institution that will welcome him and make him reenter the society, help him to reintegrate. So he has no choice but to come back to Jesus. He goes back to this itinerant preacher, this man whose own future is so uncertain. I don't know if you caught this, but in the text [it] says that Jesus was making his way to Jerusalem. As you read on you realize this is Jesus's last journey to Jerusalem because he will die in Jerusalem. This man who has no place to orient himself throws his lot with this other man who doesn't have much of a future, it looks like at the time. The Samaritan leper has no choice but to throw his lot with an uncertain prophet – letting go of expectations, of fixed points of reference, letting go of the limitations that have bound him for as long as he has suffered his leprosy. Once this man comes to Jesus, this itinerant priest, what he does is he breaks into *song*. I mean, he's excited because he has been healed as well. He didn't have anybody to tell, so he runs to tell Jesus. And he does so, no longer at a distance covering his lip, he does so *shouting* and *singing*, praising God. We are told specifically *loudly* – some encouragement when we sing later. [*equipment interruption and something about the cleansing of the temple*] longing for clarity, for stability we too can be convinced that the only way to find our place in the world, our orientation is through fixed points of reference, institutions where we can be declared and told that we are good, accepted, okay to rejoin.

In a world that is framed by so much change and mobility, we increasingly grieve the loss of those fixed points: the authority of Scripture; the institutions of politics; our very own congregations. There's a sense of disorientation that the things that make for our orientation and our society – its very foundations – are shaken, and we are discouraged oftentimes by how to respond as churches, as denominations, anxious about the well-being of our communities and families.

See, historically we have oriented ourselves by triangulation, right? So, a little science, a little lecture. You know, when the folks were out at sea, they would find two fixed points – maybe a mountain and a lighthouse – and through two fixed points they could figure out their location. You know, you would do a calculation to triangulate where you were so you could get oriented. Nine of the ten lepers go back to a fixed point so that they can reorient themselves and figure out how to re-enter society. But the tenth one, the Samaritan, doesn't have that choice, so he must orient himself differently.

What's odd is that today we don't orient ourselves by fixed points. I don't know how you find your way home or wherever you're going, but usually for me it has to do with this little thing [holds up a cell phone] that uses GPS technology. Do you know how GPS finds us and locates us? By making a line in a coordination between four (4) falling objects. GPS depends on orienting ourselves to satellites that are falling objects around the earth – and a whole bunch of them falling, falling, falling, that's how they get into orbit. And what GPS does is that rather than getting us oriented by fixed points, it orients us by coordinating four falling objects all of which are moving at the same time, and it manages to give us a much more accurate location than triangulation ever could.

What are the ways in which we might orient ourselves to moving, falling objects, the shifting realities? How might we orient ourselves, recognizing that the set, fixed points we have assumed may

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no longer serve us well – and may never have served us well? That our way forward is not necessarily in some elaborate imagined, distant past as a society, making whatever it is great again, as if it's been there before; but that our way forward may be actually in a new way by a much different way.

- ◇ That we can indeed rely on things like Scripture that are not set in stone and clearly interpreted but that require our work of interpretation.
- ◇ That we might be able to orient ourselves by our communities as we rebuild them and imagine them in some new way.
- ◇ What is the church's role in helping those on the margins who are feeling disoriented within our congregations and beyond it to help us find our way home?
- ◇ What is the church's role for those who, like the lepers, live in the border between places and are forced to live on those margins?

Immigrants, as one of those groups in this community, have found their home in many of our industries. They have found their home in the meaning of the work they do, even if some of them are doing it without proper documentation. They have found their home in other ways in agriculture, in business, in industry. Are they finding their way home at church? In our communities? How may we become the type of community that welcomes those disoriented ones, recognizing our own disorientation and knowing that our future is shared together?

This past June, the government in England – the UK – appointed a minister of loneliness, a minister for loneliness – a *cabinet* level position, recognizing both the health significant concern of loneliness and the impact it is having on society. The studies that led to this decision are calling on a government to decide that this is an issue of national well-being and security.

I went for a run yesterday afternoon and ran through the campus of the University of Washington and there are these signs out on the lawn that read "You Are Enough." The days are getting longer. The cherry blossoms are coming. Life is messy but you are more resilient than you think you are. Signs are speaking to those who feel isolated, disoriented by all of this transition. What are the signs the church is putting out – for ourselves and for others – that encourage them to know this word that "You are my child the beloved, the one in whom I am well pleased,"⁶ as Jesus heard from God, a message that launched him into a remarkable ministry.

Reading about England I thought of the Beatles as well.

Father McKenzie writing the words of a sermon that no one will hear

...

All the lonely people
Where do they all come from?
All the lonely people

⁶ Holy Bible NSRV (op cit) New Testament, Matthew 3:17

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Where do they all come from?⁷

The disorientation of our day can lead us to isolation from our communities, from our families, from our traditions. May we be invited by the courage of this one, the odd one and the Samaritan, who came back praising God to be the place where we go, not for certainty, but to trust in this marked man who is an uncertain prophet, a moving target. Can the church be the place where we are freed from the limits of our imagination to the point that we might just randomly break out into song.

Praise God the source of life and birth
Praise God the Word who came to earth
Praise God the Spirit, Holy Flame
All glory, [honor to God's name].⁸

"Get up and go on your way," says Jesus to the Samaritan, holding the Samaritan's hand – touching an untouchable – Jesus lifts him up and sends him on the way. But it's not a done deal. The Samaritan man like the other nine must yet find his way home but as he does, Jesus tells him he's got all his needs, "Get up and go on your way your faith has made you well."⁹

– Amen

UCUCC: DV-L

Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2018/4/04/2018

⁷ "Eleanor Rigby", The Beatles, Revolver album, 1966. Verified 4/12/2018 at <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/beatles/eleanorrigby.html>

⁸ "Praise God the Source of Life and Birth" (aka "Doxology"), by Ruth C. Duck, 2005. © GIA Publications. Verified 4/19/2008 at https://hymnary.org/text/praise_god_the_source_of_life_and_birth

⁹ Holy Bible NSRV (Op Cit) Luke 17:19