

“Difference Makes a Difference”

18th Sunday after Pentecost –10.13.2019 –Luke 17:11-19
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Grace and peace to you from God the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Be the change you want to see in the world.” This is a great quote often used to motivate Christian discipleship and it is attributed to Mohandas Gandhi, a Hindu. We hear it all the time. But do we really believe one person, one voice can actually change the world? Well, have you heard of Anne Frank or Adolph Hitler, Greta Thunberg or Rosa Parks, Martin Luther or Martin Luther King, Jr.? Ever heard of a man from Nazareth named Jesus? Well, then...

To start, a word about location - Jesus is on the way from the region of the Galilee to Jerusalem on a route that took him to an area between Galilee and Samaria where the border wasn't well defined. Boundaries and borders – we are hearing a lot about them these days – Mexico and the US; and now, Turkey and Syria. We love to draw those lines between “them” and “us,” because an ‘in-between’ place blurs who is in control. Jesus is entering a middle ground; a “no man’s land” of Jews and Samaritans and anyone else who might not hold a clear identity.

Almost every one of us has experienced situations where who we are and how we fit need redefining. If you ever went to school, or served in the military, or were a victim of a natural disaster or catastrophe – you know what happens. People of all ages and genders, races and faiths, political persuasions and economic circumstances are thrown together, often to sink or swim. Some folks – for whatever reason – use their change in situation to change the world.

Some things are accidents of place and time, of genetics or environment – Like cancer, leprosy was no respecter of age, status, gender or tribe. And these 10 men were thrown together because they had leprosy. Every tribe, every level of society, every person, could be affected, and just like cancer, leprosy is painful and fearful, but it is not as contagious as many thought. What it did was change lives – it separated them from their families, their friends, and their communities of worship. They became different; they were feared. They were cast out to live apart in the in-between place outside of town. These 10 found each other and lived together in the only place where the lines were erased. For they were lepers, in no man’s land.

Ten men. Curious that the story states ten men – *a minyan* – the minimum number required to worship, and eventually form a synagogue community. When you are a leper, no other labels carry much weight: lawyer, Jew, Samaritan, sojourner, fisherman, Pharisee. Not of that mattered. Apparently, they were all Law abiders, doing exactly what Leviticus 13 advised to keep lepers separate from others by calling out in warning. *Jesus, have mercy on us*, was their obedience to the law, and their greeting from a distance. And once Jesus tells them to go and show the priests so that they could be declared ritually clean, they went faithfully - even before realizing they were being cured – on *the way*. (Early followers of Jesus were often referred to as those who believed in “The Way.” But as they went, the Samaritan was too overwhelmed to continue. He “sees” that he is cured but understands

that no priest would receive him, as he was a Samaritan. **So he chooses Jesus as his priest,** and throws himself at Jesus' feet and praises him.

Jesus says, "... *your faith has made you well* [literally, *saved you*]." Jesus had said the same thing to woman at the anointing (7:50), woman w/hemorrhage (8:48), and the blind beggar (18:42). Apparently "wellness" (wholeness) comes in giving thanks, and there seems to be a connection to all of us having a part in the wholeness of God: *he not only saw he was healed, but returned to give thanks...* But not the other nine. Jesus seems surprised. In the end, Luke doesn't say that the other nine former-lepers were any less cured than the Samaritan, (though he does imply that they are less thankful – which somehow seems to complete the cycle.) Jesus himself points to a deeper experience. The word that gets translated as "get up" (v.19) is a word early Christians would have recognized as "to rise up" obviously having to do with resurrection. The Samaritan has been made new by the power of Jesus and he knows it! It's God's way: God provides, we return as one tenth (a tithe) of the whole, in thanks. It is not commanded, it is invited. Thanksgiving somehow makes the circle whole. That's what the nine missed. They didn't do anything wrong, they just saw their cleansing and neglected to give thanks, so they missed out on the deeper blessing, the blessing of being made whole.

So, why do you think it was the Samaritan who chose to return? Did he realize that now he had no place to belong? Did he know Jesus offered more than just a path back into his "old life?" As a Samaritan, had the "disease" of his race long ago prepared him to show others how to build community differently? Was he capable of sharing "new life" now from a *difference* perspective? Or, is Jesus using this opportunity to "heal" some prejudices in the crowd?

Why were the folks I named earlier able to change the world? Destiny, or situations in which they felt "God's perfect timing?" Life's challenges or simple circumstance? The fact that they were somehow different might have given them a deeper experience of life so that they could seize a moment in time that changed the world. Sometimes, it takes someone else, some-one unexpected, someone different to open our eyes to the blessings and wonders in our lives.

I learned about being differently-abled from my BFF's life experience. With humor and great love she would tell what it was like living with a one-armed man in the heyday of tv's *The Fugitive*. He had been her hero – doing nothing differently than anyone else – even without an arm. Even years after her father's death, he changed my world as well. At Advent, we need are learning to appreciate the power of our physical, mental, and cultural differences: a pastor from a faraway land; beautifully "different" children with Down Syndrome or Autism, those suffering from depression, anxiety or challenges of aging; victims of abuse or gun violence; families who have lost children, widows and widowers; Cancer victims and survivors; LGBTQ members who have allowed us to learn about transgender, non-gender and why none of that matters to God.

Did you know that the church is the only place in America where all 5 living generations regularly gather together? That in itself is an amazing gift. And like each and every one of you – each and every one of those folks in each and every situation and station are loved by God. Differences, if we let them take us deeper – show us different ways that we can change the world.

What if, one of the nine, sitting at table with his family suddenly bursts into tears realizing what has happened to him – and thanking God? **What if**, another, on his way from

the priest, decides to take up interpretation of the Law? **What if**, yet another, cleansed from his own leprosy, decides to dedicate his life to bettering the lives of lepers? The point is – we do not know what happened – but we realize that life in this world is not clear.

I like to think that the Samaritan lived out the third act of his life as one of those in the crowd that followed Jesus. A disciple. One who had seen Jesus firsthand. One who had been healed. One who had been made whole. One who had been saved, just as we have been. One whose eyes had been opened, and who opened other's eyes to see a changing world. May we learn to see, with different eyes. Amen.

Resources: ELCA Faith Lens