



# ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

## Episcopal Church & Student Center

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Sermon for the 20th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 23  
St. Mark's on the Campus  
October 14, 2007

A lot can be packed into one sentence, and Luke does just that with the opening line of our gospel passage for this morning:

“On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. “

Luke goes out of his way to remind us that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, on the way to the cross and all that it means. Suffering. Death. And God taking that cross to bring glory. Luke reminds us that whatever comes next in this story is in line with the cross that stands at the end of this journey.

The journey takes Jesus and his followers through the region between Samaria and Galilee. It's a geographical location, but it's also far more than that, just as if today we were to refer to the border between the west bank and Israel. It's a *metaphorical* location as well as a geographical one. The region between Samaria and Galilee is a location of conflict between peoples, of conflict between faith communities before God, each claiming a higher moral authority and a superior relationship to God's purposes on earth.

As Jesus negotiates this territory, ten lepers approach him. As becomes apparent later in the story, it's a mixed group of lepers. They're not all Jewish; at least one of them is a Samaritan. It's easy for any of us to draw lines between ourselves and others when we have the luxury to do so, when things are going relatively well. When they're going less well, we humans seem to go one of two directions. On the one hand, in especially stressful times we can drive wedges even deeper than they already are, making divisions starker and even harder to bridge.

I vividly recall sitting across a table and having a profound and unhappy disagreement about Biblical interpretation with my fundamentalist sister in law after the death of my mother in law. At a time when we should have been pulling together in a common faith, we found ourselves focusing on what divides us.

I've encountered numerous families who, when they're under duress, including at times of death, find that the divisions among them amplify rather than minimize. On the other hand, those distinctions which seem so crucial when all is going relatively well *can* fall away when people are in crisis.

One of my favorite stories in this regard has to do with the family of the Episcopal Church, when during the Civil War the Church in the north continued to include the dioceses in the south as part of the roll call at General Convention. That little sign of grace – that little sign of saying we are one no matter what divides us -- made it far easier after the war for us to remain united when other denominations divided.

Distinctions falling by the wayside might be happening with these ten lepers in the gospel; we don't really know that they're hanging out together before Jesus shows up on the scene, but at least they do come to him together as a group. Maybe they understand that all they have left is each other. They can't look to their larger faith communities because they've been removed from them, distanced from them and excluded from them quite deliberately. If they are to find community, they must look to one another for it.

Those ways we like to divide and distinguish people one from another, one group claiming a higher moral authority than another, those distinctions seem far less important to these lepers; those distinctions no longer can be because they need one another.

Few of us are as eager as Jesus to eat with the unpopular among us, with those who challenge us beyond our comfort zone, however broad that is. But even the diseased look attractive when that's all we have, when we suddenly find that we are one of them.

Part of living into God's reign is growing to understand that we are *all* diseased, *all* broken – and that we have only each other; indeed, God reveals just how much we are one – with each other AND with God – as God takes on *our* brokenness at Christ's cross.

If we are to find true community – with God and with each other – we find it after acknowledging and embracing our shared fragility in this life. The temptation is to deny our common disease rather than to embrace it in ourselves and in each other, and to recognize that if we are to encounter God, if we are to live with God, we do so right there in the midst of shared brokenness.

This band of lepers stands together before Jesus, where no distinctions are made among them. As we stand consciously in the presence of God, the ways in which we separate ourselves from each other fall away. The high grounds we claim fall to those low grounds we also claim, our shared failings before God and our common need for healing, a need the entire human family carries.

One of the most profound losses in the current controversies in the Anglican family is a refusal to stand with each other despite our differences. I am continually frustrated with Peter Akinola, the Archbishop of Nigeria who is leading the condemnation of the Episcopal Church in the United States, and I am sure that I am right and he is wrong about some things.

But I must also humbly admit that I am wrong in ways, too; that is a given, a starting point for all of us. The greater challenge isn't even to admit that; the greater challenge is to stand with my brother in faith before God and find in Peter Akinola the face of Christian community. How much easier it might be if both of us were living in a leper colony and had only each other, rather than having others in whom to find support and company in judgmental and divisive attitudes and ways.

The shadow of the cross -- of all the sin and division it represents -- reaches far. Jesus turns that around so that sunlight shines instead; he redeems all the shadows in which we live -- but redemption occurs only when we trust in *Him* more than we trust in ourselves.

One other thing about our gospel for this morning. Jesus instructs all ten lepers to go to the priests. As they walk away, all ten are healed. They obey him and they are healed. But the passage goes on to point back to the root of obedience, which isn't so much about a military kind of obedience, although on occasion spiritual discipline calls us simply to do what we must do.

The linguistic root of obedience is to hear, or to listen to. It has that connotation of not just following orders but of letting something echo around inside of us, rattle around in us and change us, to reach a deeper understanding within that gets lived out in our lives.

We see something of this in the Samaritan who returns to Jesus to praise God. Although all of the ten are healed of their leprosy, he alone returns. The one who not only has leprosy, but also the one outside the Jewish community: *two* steps removed from the chosen people of God.

Jesus tells him that his faith has made him well.

Actually, the translation here is not as strong as it could be. The translation suggests that it looks back to when the ten are made clean, when the ten are healed. In reality what Jesus says to this one man is that his faith has saved him, his faith has made him whole. It's a different word than what is used for the healing itself.

Maybe there's some deliberate ambiguity on Luke's part; certainly there's some deliberate distinction on Luke's part between this man and the others. Luke wants to convey that this one man has experienced a wholeness the others have not. Maybe they will -- in fact, maybe they have! But we don't know it.

What we do know is that this man enters into a wholeness that arises not only out of humility in the presence of God -- "Have mercy on us!", he cries with the rest of the lepers -- but, coupled with that humility, is a profound gratitude for the reality God has made possible in his life.

A future that was not possible before his encounter with God in Jesus; a future in which he can acknowledge God working even through a religious "other" -- one he, as a Samaritan, would not necessarily have embraced unless he knew the depth of his need.

The offer not just for *healing* but for *wholeness* is made to all of the lepers – just as it's is made to all of us. Some choose it and others do not. Just as sometimes we all choose wholeness and at other times we all settle for brokenness.

For those of us who stand within any faith tradition that claims for ourselves those bold words, “The people of God” , this gospel reading reminds us rather pointedly that that God is always larger than we are. That God's favor rests on those outside the community with convictions we share as well as on those inside it. It reminds us that we have no reason to carry judgment against anyone but ourselves and plenty of reason to do that. And that we have no justification for separating ourselves from any kind of brokenness that someone else might carry.

In fact, for those of us who follow Jesus, our call is rather to align ourselves with the brokenness in the world, so that God's redeeming power can intercede. This gospel reminds us that though *our* distinctions and divisions are many, *God's* are not; the sun shines on us all in God's presence. Even if at times that rots *our* socks and is hard for *us* to take, even if it stretches us to new dimensions of love we're not sure we're even capable of -- if we truly trust in God's mercy, would we really have it any other way?

There is indeed awideness in God's mercy; so wide, that it includes even us. I f we forget that, we forget the heart of the good news. And if we forget that good news, we forget it not only to our own peril, but to the peril of the whole human family.

Let us not forget.

Let us remember.