

Fear of Difference

Shepherd's Grace Church

October 13, 2013 (Pet Blessing Sunday)

Luke 17:11-19

¹¹On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹²As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" ¹⁴When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?" ¹⁸Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." (Also Read Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7)

Context: Today is Pet Sunday. In worship, all our animal friends are present and we will later offer a special blessing for them! Imagine hearing this message with your pet at your feet, his or her unconditional love for you being poured out!

Our big dog Eugh came to us in the winter time. When he first showed up, it was to play with the kids in the neighborhood who were sledding on the snow covered street outside our house. Kenton and Broderick were both there. Eugh came up to the group like he had always been a part of them. He jumped and slid and ran around just like one of the kids! Almost immediately, Kenton ran inside and asked Rochelle for something he could give a big dog to eat. Chelle said, "No! You're not feeding some stray dog!" She then looked out the window and next went outside because she could not believe that such a well behaved and beautiful animal could possibly be a stray.

After petting the dog for awhile, she brought it to the back yard and gave him something to eat. She thought she knew whose dog it was. She called that person and they said that they had their dog with them. She called several others who she thought had dogs meeting that description. None of them claimed the dog. One person she spoke to said she thought she had seen the dog with another who was pregnant. The dogs had apparently been rummaging through trash cans for a couple of weeks around town.

We still could not believe the dog was a stray. He was so well behaved and so comfortable around people that we knew he had to belong to someone. Chelle called all the animal clinics and everyone she could think of. We posted flyers and tried everything else we knew to find his owner. We had no response. Meanwhile, Kenton wanted to name the dog. He said, "What am I supposed to call him?"

Rochelle answered, "Just say hey you. He will come to you then." Sure enough, whenever Kenton or Broderick called, "Hey You," the dog came right to them.

Two or three weeks went by. No one answered any of our attempts to find his original owner. It was winter time and the weather was cold but every morning when I got up, I looked out and there was this big yellow dog sleeping with his head sticking out of the dog house the boys and their papa had made for a much smaller pug.

Chelle and I talked about it and came to the realization that a dog had adopted us! He had made his home with us and had taken up residence. We talked about what to name him, but that had really already been taken care of. After two or three weeks of calling this stray dog "you" that was all he would answer to. We changed the spelling but the new dog at our house was named Eugh.

Eugh's situation was similar to that of the Hebrews exiled in Babylon that Jeremiah speaks to this morning. The exiles find themselves alienated and abandoned. They find themselves in strange surroundings, cut off from those whom they knew, loved, and cared about. They were not there of their own choice but they were there. They were forced to make a new life for themselves and they were confused.

Just like a stray dog, they felt uncertain, unsure, and perhaps unwilling to make a new home in a foreign land. They longed for the familiar surroundings of home and the familiar voices of people they knew and loved and cared for. Those things were gone however, and that is the message Jeremiah had for them this morning.

Jeremiah's message to the exiles in Babylon was simple. This is where you are. This is where the Lord has brought you to. You can mope and be miserable or you can recognize your surroundings and make the best of your situation. You can build your homes here and make a new life for you or you can continue to long for that which has been taken from you and experience a sadness and sense of loss for the rest of your life.

Some of us find ourselves in situations like this. We lose our loved ones or are cut off from them because of circumstances beyond our control. We grieve for a time as we should. We miss them and we long for them but at some point we have to move on. The experience is painful and there are times we look back and long for what we once had. We want the world to stop or even go backward but the world does not.

In these moments, we hear the words of Jeremiah. Make your home where you are! Build new houses and raise your families where you are. God is not saying, "Just get over it!" He is instead saying that the life He has given is one of abundance. That abundance is the wholeness that is life! That abundance is

the reality we live in. We are more than happy to accept the abundance God promises us when it is what we want, what we enjoy, what we long for. How do we accept the abundance of difficulty this life also brings us?

The exiles Jeremiah writes of this morning struggled with exactly that question. They were used to being God's chosen people. They were used to having the "Temple" to worship in. They were used to knowing the promises God made to them. They were used to being special! Now, they were no bodys; ordinary people who were asked to do ordinary things in a place far from their home and without notice or nurture from others!

God's words must have seemed harsh to them. "This is the place where I have put you," says the Lord! This is the place where you can make your homes, raise your families, live your lives! Can you imagine their heartache? They must have wondered how they could have sinned so grievously as to cause God to abandon them so!

In this way they were different from Eugh. Our dog had committed no sin. He had done no wrong to others. He only offered unconditional love to those who were around him. The Hebrew people, on the other hand had failed to live into the commandments of God. They had ignored the widow, the poor, the orphan and as a result, they were receiving the consequence of their action. Alienation and abandonment comes about for two reasons.

The first is we fall victim to abuse. When we brought Eugh into our home we did not know he was a victim. He seemed so happy to receive our care and love that his actions were of care and love for us...that is until one day when we started the vacuum cleaner. As soon as he heard the loud noise, Eugh ran for cover. He went to the farthest back closet, burrowed under the shoe boxes and clothes and cowered there until the noise stopped. If I ever needed to scold him, he would cower and tremble in fear. It was then that we knew Eugh was a dumped dog who had been abused.

People who have been abused often respond in much the same way. Sometimes they do not know they are victims until there is an event that "triggers" their memory. After they experience the trigger, they often hide and cower until or unless someone offers them a kind word and an understanding heart. If they perceive the offer as genuine, they can begin the process of healing and become a survivor. The process is a lifelong process; striving to overcome the hurt of realizing that those who should have loved them the most were the very ones who perpetrated the abuse!

The second reason for alienation is that we suffer the consequence of our sinful actions. Even though God forgives and even though the work of Christ on the cross has absolved us of our sin, there are still consequences for our actions. Our sinful actions hurt people and they hurt God's creation. Sometimes there are consequences for those actions. The people of exile in today's lesson from Jeremiah were

suffering the consequences of their actions. In Isaiah 1 and 2 they were admonished to care for the poor, the widowed, the orphaned in their land. They failed to do so and even after many opportunities to repent and turn back to God they still failed. As a result, there was a consequence.

Just as God exiled Adam and Eve as a consequence of their breaking His commandment, so God also exiled the best and the brightest of the Hebrew people. He did not exile them all. He only exiled those who should have seen and known better. He exiled those who were aware of the boundaries between them and those less fortunate and chose not to cross those boundaries. This is where our lesson from the Hebrew Bible and the Gospel of Luke intersect today.

Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem. He has been headed this direction since chapter 9. (9: 51) He is in a region between Samaria and Galilee. Jesus has crossed a boundary. He is in a place where he is not supposed to be. If we really study the Gospels, we discover that Jesus frequently crosses these boundaries, both physical and spiritual. In John 4 he meets a Samaritan woman at the well. (No Jewish male would be alone with a Samaritan woman) In Luke 1 he is born out of wedlock. He heals the blind of the Sabbath and cures sick and the lame who are unclean. Jesus recognizes the boundaries we have set up as humans and he readily crosses them to demonstrate that they are not God's boundaries. God knows no boundaries. All are neighbors and all are deserving of God's presence!

On the "wrong" side of the boundary, Jesus enters a village. As he enters, 10 lepers approach him. They keep their distance because to do otherwise would lead to a punishment of death. These people were ostracized. They carried disease and the disease, as was understood in their day was caused because of something they had done to offend God! They kept their distance and were on the very edge of the village.

How often do we keep our sick, our poor, our widowed, our alienated on the very edges of our society? Those who have "AIDS" are shunned and condemned and they are judged by their lifestyle even though we know little about their lifestyle at the center where decent people live! Those who have learning abilities that are different from most are moved to the fringes of our educational system and are subject to ridicule often from students and sometimes even from educators who push them away when they need help. The elderly are put in homes where they are not often visited. They can be forgotten there and "die" in peace! I know that not all of you react to these groups in the ways I have described but I have spoken to enough in these groups to know that this is often the perception they have. Perception is reality!

The lepers were on the fringes of their world. They were kept at a distance! From the margins, they called out! I wonder if they had called out before Jesus arrived. Perhaps they called out daily, "have mercy on us!" but on this day they called out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" Today they were

heard! Today they had voice. Today they mattered! Today they were like the pets we all brought to worship this morning! They were special even though they were different! Today they were recognized!

As soon as Jesus heard them; not in awhile or later, but as soon as Jesus heard them he stopped all else he was doing. Here he sets an example for us! Here he is clear about what is expected. When we notice others in need, we are to set aside our tasks and assist them, regardless of our own situation or circumstance. There are those who would believe that their work, their ministry is of a higher calling than to those who are less fortunate. There are those who think the maintenance of a building takes priority over the ministry to the poor. There are some who think that the completion of a project takes priority over spending time with family! There are some who think the inconvenience of a pet allows them to be dumped and discarded! Jesus' leadership is clear!

When he hears them he instructs them. They are to move from the margins to the very center of the community. They are to go and find the priest, the pastor who will affirm their status as legitimate! Often we wait for affirmation by someone in charge that another is OK. Jesus expected that the priest would make this affirmation and welcome those at the margins back into the fold!

While they were on their way, they were healed. They went out of faith! They called out to Jesus even as they might have called out to others because they were in need. They believed! All of them believed in Jesus. All of them were healed. Only one went back however! This one is identified for us. He goes back praising God in a loud voice and as Jesus tells us, he is a foreigner!

Jesus accepts his adulation and praise! He acknowledges his thank you and then He asks the question burning in all our brains. Where are the rest? Were not 10 healed, where are the other 9? We are not given the answer in today's reading and we are not given the answer anywhere else in scripture, but we can speculate.

We know that the one was a foreigner. We will come back to him in just a bit, however because he is foreign we can conclude that the others were not. The 9 who were residents knew the laws of the land in which they were living. They knew that they were told by an authority to do something. Perhaps they were going because they were told to do so! Perhaps they were aware of a boundary that they were unwilling to cross.

Often times we find ourselves told by authorities to do something. Currently our congress has found itself told to do something. They were faced with a legal and compelling requirement that they shut the government down because legally they were out of money to operate. They did what they were legally required to do! They made the right decisions according to the law!

As we sit here today, we know they have other options. We know they could compromise, they could engage in conversation, they could contact those who believe differently from them and find common ground. Currently, we know they have done none of these things! Currently we know that the food care programs for the poor, the widowed, the orphaned are being reduced and withheld because they have chosen not to talk. Currently we know that winter home heating subsidies for people who cannot afford to pay are at risk because they have not chosen to talk. Currently we know that they are still receiving their pay checks while many who rely on the rest of us to care for the poor, the widowed, the orphaned are going without because they have not chosen to talk! Currently we find ourselves exiled in a country that is dysfunctional and depleted because they have not chosen to talk! We, those of us who are the best and the brightest have been exiled and are forced to make our homes and raise our families in a place foreign to us because they have not chosen to talk! But they did as they were told!

The 9 did as they were told! They received their healing and their comfort back at the center of the community. They were accepted and they were assimilated into the rest of the culture and the world went on. That is what the world, that is what Satan is counting on. God works miracles in this world everyday and the miracles go unnoticed and un-praised! The world we live in moves too fast, too furiously to take time to give praise and glory to God! The world we live in makes it ok to dump our dogs and our poor and not pay attention to them! The world we live in is a world of the 9! The world of the majority!

But what of the one? Why did the 1 go back? What did he know? We like to think we would have been the 1. We like to believe we would have been eager to fall to our knees and give praise and honor to God for the mighty work He has done in us! But what of the one? The one was a foreigner! The one was an outsider! Perhaps the 1 was in the country illegally, or without proper documentation, or perhaps the 1 had proper documentation but knew that documentation would not be accepted because there were others who were in the country illegally and "they all look alike!"

Perhaps the one knew the only safe place for him to be was in a place where there was no judgment or condemnation. Perhaps the one recognized that in many ways his life would not change even though he was now clean and rid of this heinous disease!

What do we really think of the one? We want to praise the one for his praise and worship of God but are we really willing to accept him into our midst? Are we really willing to invite him into our house of God? The one who came back to Jesus did not go to the priests? He did not go to the pastor! I have to pause here and look at myself in the mirror! Am I willing to accept one who is so different from me or do I have a "Fear of Difference?" Do I as pastor welcome the other? Do I welcome the stranger or am I suspicious and searching for the fault in the one who comes into our midst? Do I cause the 1 to feel alienated and abandoned just because he or she is from a different place than me?

Today we will take up our C.A.N. fund offering, the monthly offering we collect to assist those in our community who are in need. On a daily basis I encounter these people. They come to our doors because we are a church. They think we can help. They think we can heal. On a daily basis I hear their stories and they cross the boundaries of my life and theirs. On a daily basis I am skeptical. I have been taken advantage of. I have been lied to. I have been beaten out of a buck! How should I respond?

Jesus says to the one, "Get up, go on your way. Your faith has healed you!" What he has, he offers freely. In Acts 3, Peter says the same thing to a beggar! Get up and go! Your faith has made you well. Move to the center and be received into the community. It may not be the place you were born. It may not be the place you expected, but it is where you are. Raise your family here, make your home here, worship your God here and here will I bless you!

As we look around at our animals today, we see great differences. It is easy to recognize the differences in our pets. Some are dogs; some are cats; some are fish; some are pigs. Some are big and some are small. Some are fat and some are not. The differences are obvious. Recognizing the human stranger in our midst is not always so obvious! Sometimes the 1 looks like the many and we pass them by. Sometimes the 1 looks different and we are afraid so we avoid them.

Our pets, different as they are offer us unconditional love. We offer them the same. Jim Reed has written stories of his pets and one is of an animal who has been here today. Daisy has a hump and looks very different from the other dogs Jim brought. He tells in his stories that at night, after Daisy gets into her blankets, Jim props the hump up with a pillow so she will be more comfortable. In her extreme difference, Daisy gets Jim's unconditional love.

The 1 who returned to Jesus lived as the one among us who had been abused. He was dumped from the back of the pick-up and was abandoned. He was ignored by those who should have cared for him the most. Now he finds himself among us. Will we care for him or will we continue to live in "Fear of Difference!" Amen!