

## **“The Turnaround”**

Sermon Oct. 09, 2016

By Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7, 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

The writer in 2 Timothy states boldly, “The word of God is not chained.” Let me ask you, therefore, to unbind yourselves from hearing the gospel passage from any one viewpoint.

The gospel story, which is of 10 lepers whom Jesus healed, one of them-- a Samaritan-- who turned back, praising God and thanking Jesus.

We turn our perspective first to the lepers- these are border people on a border land. They stay in a leper colony outside the borders of a village to keep their disease, which was considered ritually unclean, away from those whose bodies are considered ritually clean. Not only that, the village itself is somewhere on the borders, between Samaria and Galilee. Ancient maps do not even depict a road to get from one region to another. What we do know about Galilee is that it was granted a sort of religious exemption that allowed a sort of tribal self-rule, that was somewhat autonomous from the imperial rule of the Roman Empire. But even that autonomy was on the border, and the powers of Rome constantly threatened the Jews’ sense of agency to follow their God and not Caesar. Galilee had a governor, the son of Herod, who was a Jew-- but he was in collusion with Rome. Southern Galilee was on the brink of revolution often. As for Samaria, which is what we would today know as the West Bank, where Palestinians live behind a wall, even then Samaritans were considered less than-- religiously so, ethnically so, and socially so-- not unlike the experience of Palestinians today. So these lepers were living outside the borders of recognition, outside the borders of ritual, and outside the borders of relationship.

We turn our perspective next to the priests-- these are the givers of legitimacy, the gatekeepers to God, and the inspectors for cleanliness. Interestingly, Jesus did not tell the lepers where to find the priests to get their certificates for cleanliness. Should they go to the Temple, in Jerusalem, where the Jews worship, or should they go to the priests at Mt. Gerazim, where Samaritans claimed was the right place for worship of God? We know in Jesus' ministry, he was constantly pushing the priests to expand the boundaries of their thinking and practice; the box they had for God and God's grace was simply too small. What would the priests think of these cleansed lepers?

Now, let's turn our perspective to Jesus- the one who grants healing. Before he does that, he *sees* them. The common greeting in the Zulu language is *Sawubona*, "I see you." The common response to that greeting is *Ngikhona*, "Because you see me, I exist<sup>1</sup>." Jesus *seeing* these lepers gives them recognition and a way to exist that was different than was allowed by those who exiled them from their community due to their sickness. Jesus is one who sees us. Jesus sees our suffering-- it is a suffering we will see even Jesus join us in. Jesus seeks to transform suffering, as well as the institutions that refuse to see suffering.

We turn now to the Samaritan-- the one who is doubly healed. The Samaritan bears the burden of belonging to two markers that place him on the outskirts. He has leprosy. He is a Samaritan. He is healed by Jesus of his leprosy. He also experiences healing by his own faith. Jesus cures him of his leprosy, the same as the other nine. But then the Samaritan turns back to Jesus, in praise of God and thanks to Jesus. Jesus asks, "was none of [these ten] found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner? Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." For the Samaritan, gratitude is the thing that adds the double amount of healing to him.

---

<sup>1</sup> Glen Pearson, "African Famine: I See You" in *Huffington Post* August 9, 2011

We turn now to ourselves, the hearers and listeners of the story. Many of us do not have faith of the Samaritan, if we are honest with ourselves. We fail to turn around and see what has led us to the places of success, achievement or healing, and to say “thanks” or even “wow.” Or, we run to the places that grant certificates of belonging and cling to them, desperately hoping to be seen. We fail to turn back and recognize and give thanks that *Jesus* has seen us. It is that recognition and gratitude that can transform and save us, as much as the healing act itself.

But there is good news for those who struggle with faith. In 2 Timothy, “Paul” says “If we are faithless, Jesus remains faithful-- for he cannot deny himself.” Jesus is going to keep trying for us. Jesus is going to keep showing us the bridge between suffering and healing, between shame and grace, between isolation and belonging, and between desperation and hope. And Jesus is going to keep showing us the bridges towards transformation of our culture, especially when it is a culture that disrespects humanity and degrades life.

I am going to turn again. This time, I am going to turn over the power to speak. Over the past couple of days, I felt the urge for the pulpit to be a place that addresses some things that have been said about women in the news. As Karl Barth said, a theologian should have the Bible in one hand, and the newspaper in the other. An NPR story came out last week, “Why Don’t We Hear More from the Religious Left?” I often grumble to my spouse, who works in news media, that it is not fair that the Christian right gets a monopoly on what is said in the public sphere about Christian teachings. “Well,” she always tells me, “Your people need to be better at telling your stories!”

So as I was thinking how I might address language from Friday that advocated for the sexual assault of women, language that degraded the humanity of women and also of men who would accept such behavior, I felt

as Christians we are called to tell an alternative story. I see you guys. I recognize that the language that was shared on Friday is not your language. As Christians, we are called to tell the story about how Genesis 1 shares that God created humankind-- both male and female-- in God's own image. We are called to tell stories about who we see, especially when we take notice of oppressed groups that often get overlooked. We are called to stop the shaming of women, just as Jesus called the stone-throwers to drop their rocks. And we are called to change the narrative from "boys will be boys" into a narrative that challenges men and boys to act with the integrity and righteousness God sets within them. But my voice is not enough for the telling of the story. So I asked David Voreacos to give a witness about what being a man, and a person of faith, means to him in a culture that still, in many sectors, not only accepts but encourages disrespect of women and girls. I asked David yesterday because he is a professional writer and could turn something around quickly; because he is the father of 2 young men and a young woman; because he is a person of faith and a leader in the church; and because I thought he might say yes. So I turn this sermon over to him, but also to *you* to start to tell your own stories of faith, boldly, in ways that see others and turn us back to God.