

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
The Reverend D. S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
October 9, 2022
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7
Psalm 66:1-11
2 Timothy 2:8-15
Luke 17:11-19

In the Borderlands

On September 20, which seems like a very long time ago now, Becky and I flew from Key West to Austin, Texas. From there we drove westward in the great state of Texas. For nine days we were back in Becky's home state which she deeply loves and which I have also loved all my life.

There were many "texanic" adventures all along the way, but the culmination of our road trip was to explore the Big Bend where I first visited as a six year old and where Becky had long wanted to visit for the first time.

The Big Bend region of Far West Texas is an amazingly beautiful and expansive geographic area in the Chihuahuan Desert. In many places you can see for miles, row upon row of mountains from the multiple ranges that exist there. It is full of wide-open spaces, rugged and often harsh landscapes, and at nighttime, amazingly starry skies. Big Bend National Park is only part of the region, but the park alone encompasses over 800,000 acres (1,252 square miles) and is larger than the state of Rhode Island.

This region is also a borderland. The name Big Bend refers to a giant horseshoe-shaped bend in the Rio Grande, the river that marks the border between the US and Mexico. Opposite that section of Texas for not quite 200 miles, on the other side of the river are the Mexican states of Chihuahua and Coahuila.

For at least 10,000 years, humans have lived here. And for the last 400 hundred years, people of different ethnic backgrounds and occupations have dwelled together in this in-between region, this borderland.

They have shared food and drink and religious practices and music and language and clothing and DNA. Though not an entirely blissful history, for the most part, people living in this region have figured out how to live together and not only to tolerate but to celebrate and even incorporate their apparent differences. Is this Texas or Mexico? Yes.

People and cultures mix in borderlands. It's just what happens. When humans live in proximity, they tend to share and exchange and imitate ways of living.

Jesus is in a borderland in today's gospel. Is it Samaria or Galilee? Yes. It's unclear.

which one but seems actually to be both: the region in between the regions. One thing for sure, it's not Judea where Jerusalem is. He's heading that way, and he'll get to Jerusalem for the last time soon enough. Today, though, he's sort of on his home turf of Galilee and sort of in Samaria.

Translated to where we live, we could say he's not in Miami or Dade County; he's somewhere in Monroe County: in a place that's much more sparsely populated and much less pretentious; a place you don't usually wind up without intending to go there.

Luke tells us that in this borderland Jesus came to a certain village; doesn't say which one. That's on purpose. It could be any of the villages in that in-between place. In borderlands, to a certain degree, everyone is both an insider and an outsider, both a resident and a visitor, both native-born and foreigner. Everybody is everything; it's a place of mixing and conflation.

But even in borderlands, there are some folks that most other folks prefer to avoid. A group of these kind of folks, ten of them, some Jews and some Samaritans, call out to Jesus, call him by name, call him by a title, and ask for his assistance: *Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!*

These are ten men, some Jews, some Samaritans, who have leprosy. They approach him, but they do not come right up to him. They are conditioned to keep their distance from everyone else. This is probably how they came to hang out together as a religiously and ethnically mixed group. What they had in common was their disease. What they had in common was everyone else did their best to keep clear of them.

What's so bad about leprosy? Biblical leprosy is not what we call leprosy today. Another name for modern leprosy is Hansen's disease. Biblical leprosy produced a skin condition that made people with leprosy look like corpses. They looked like death. And nothing defiles like death, especially in a religious system based on ritual purity. Everyone avoided them, and they avoided everyone who didn't have the same disease.

Everyone has some sort of ailment some time, some ache, some pain, some illness, some wound, some injury. We don't get out of this life without some or all of those. Nearly all of us at nearly any point have some sort of dis-ease, some kind of discomfort about something. The difference for these men with leprosy is that their disease is obvious, observable. They can easily be called out and cast off.

Jesus hears them and sees them and heeds their request. *Go and show yourselves to the priests*, he says. Which priests? The priests of the temple way off in Jerusalem? Or the priests of the temple much closer by on Mount Gerazim in Samaria? We don't

know. It doesn't say.

What we do know is that Jesus says, *Go* to those ten men, and they go. According to Luke, as they go, they are made clean. As they journey together, they are healed.

One of the ten men sees that he is healed. He turns back, praising God. Now, the uncleanness of his leprosy taken away, he can safely draw so near to Jesus as to fall down at his very feet, thanking him.

I don't know about you, but I've heard quite a few sermons on this gospel passage that focus on how nine of ten people healed just carried on with their lives, their healed and restored lives, and never even said thank you.

But that is not what the text says. Rather, it says, one of the men, one of the ten, realizing that he is healed, turns around, praises God, returns to Jesus, falls at his feet, and keeps on thanking him.

Where are the other nine? Perhaps they have not yet realized they are already healed.

Jesus doesn't need to touch these people with leprosy in order to heal them. This story reveals that he is the culmination of the law and the prophets. It all comes together and holds together in Jesus the Christ. Moses, the great lawgiver of Israel, healed his sister Miriam of leprosy without touching her. Elisha, the great prophet of Israel, healed a foreigner, a Syrian general called Naaman, of leprosy without touching him. Moses healed other children of Israel. Elisha even healed foreigners. Jesus heals both; Jesus brings healing to all the people of the borderlands.

We often find Jesus crisscrossing borders of various kinds throughout the gospels. This is particularly the case in Luke's gospel. We see it in today's reading, for sure. It is also prominent in Luke chapter 10.

At the beginning of Luke 10, Jesus sends the seventy (or seventy-two, depending on what translation you are reading). These are 35 (or 36) dynamic duos. No Lone Rangers. It's a buddy system, and it's all about crossing thresholds and sharing hospitality.

It's the earliest commissioning of Jesus followers by Jesus for a particular work, for spreading good news by spreading out across a territory.

His instructions to them are very simple and quite demanding at the same time. Don't take a bunch of equipment. Don't load up on every possible thing you can imagine you might need along the way. Wear sensible clothes for the environment. Travel light. Suss the rest out as you go along.

One way to understand the sending of the seventy is as a commission to folks following Jesus who are not part of the inner circle of the apostles to show up in the doorways, to appear on the thresholds where they are least likely to be expected.

In other words, to place themselves in borderlands, in in-between places, and see what happens.

They are to go in peace, and they are to extend greetings of peace. If they are invited in to someone's home, they are to accept the invitation and receive whatever hospitality is offered to them by those whose homes they enter. If they are cussed out for even knocking on the door, they are still to give a greeting of peace and to carry on their way.

How these commissioned Jesus followers respond to others is not to be based on how folks respond to them. They are to be about good news and *be* good news, regardless of the reception they receive.

On Wednesday night, some St Paul's folks and some folks from Cornish Memorial AME Zion, and one person from First Congregational UCC showed up at M&M Laundry on the corner of White and Virginia Streets.

This was the soft launch of our new collaborative ministry Loads of Love. We used donated quarters to pay for 52 loads of laundry and 1,160 dryer minutes.

We interacted with one another as members of different congregations and with a few dozen patrons of the laundromat. When we said hello and told folks we were paying for everyone's laundry, most of them were surprised. And all of them were grateful. One young woman said, "You have made my night."

Only one family declined our offer to pay for their laundry. And that is their prerogative. They also made a donation on their way out to help for next time.

A laundromat is a kind of borderland, and in-between space. All sorts of folks wind up there from all kinds of backgrounds and dealing with all manner of circumstances. Especially in the aftermath of a hurricane, people had stuff that needed to be washed and dried, that needed to be cleaned, restored.

The next iteration of Loads of Love will be on Wednesday, October 26, from 5-9 PM, again at M&M Laundry. You can support this ministry in three ways. You can pray for it. You can give money to it, especially quarters. And you can be one of the volunteers in it. It's like happy hour for laundry: free washing and drying for everyone who comes in with laundry during the specified time.

If you are interested in getting involved, please contact Sarah Kindinger or Tammi

Hoback. They are the two lay people who proposed and instigated this new and fabulous ministry.

We are tasked with extending greetings of peace and offering and receiving hospitality. We go where the people are rather than being angry or judgmental about where they are not. Especially in our current moment following a hurricane, coming out of COVID, we are called to move forward not backward. There is no going back to what was. And it is not entirely clear what is next. We are living in ongoing days of disruption. Things are not going to smooth out and settle down for good, at least not anytime soon.

This means we are all in a kind of borderland situation pretty much every moment. Not unlike the border of Galilee and Samaria where we find Jesus today. Not unlike the Hebrew exiles in the reading from Jeremiah today.

Through the prophet Jeremiah, God tells God's people in that strange place far from home to acknowledge their losses. And the word for them is a word for us, too. There is no quick fix. We must live where we are. There is hospitality and community even in the midst of hurt, even in the presence of profound loss. And we are to seek the welfare of the city where we live now because the welfare and wellbeing of that city are our own welfare and wellbeing. As we keep going, as we journey together, we will be healed and restored, together as we make our way. And may God bless us and empower us to live faithfully in this borderland.