

## Love Knows No Boundaries

Imagine that you have contracted a disease that forces you to leave your family, friends, and community. It is against the law for you to stay. One reason is infection. Another is social. Because of your disease, you become an “undesirable” in the eyes of your community. You are an outcast. You leave your home and after wandering here and there, searching for a place to begin your new life, you find solace in another group like you...a group who is also cast out, sick and without much hope. You notice that in this group, there are no barriers of culture, creed, religion or social status. The only existing barrier is that which separates you from the rest of known society. This group has solidarity, but not in normal areas: the rich goals of life, hopes and dreams of the future, or in the pursuit of success. The solidarity is found in shared suffering.

Jesus is traveling between Galilee and Samaria, touching the outskirts of the two provinces, as he is making his way back to Jerusalem in Judea. He is in the part of the land where communities are small, few and far between. As Jesus approaches one of these small communities, a group of ten people, identified as lepers, meekly approach him. They ask simply for mercy.

Imagine again that you were a member of this group. You would know that Jesus, as a Jew, may not pay attention to you. He may shoo you away, as he would not normally associate with an unclean person such as yourself. You would approach timidly, as if expecting the worse, yet having faith that Jesus would show you mercy. And for this group and because of their boldness, they are rewarded.

They are told to go to the priests and show themselves to them, so they could be restored and welcomed back into the community. Imagine their haste, as they are caught in the excitement. They run into town, to be restored to their family and friends. To be healthy again...what a feeling!

Last spring, I was doing the roommate flip/flop and as one pair of roomies moved out, I called a carpet cleaning service to prepare for my new set of roommates. They squeezed me in with the last appointment of the day on a Friday afternoon. This is when Saja showed up. Saja was an Indian man. And when I took one look at his face, I could tell he was exhausted from a long hard day of working. He put on his best, forced smile, and introduced himself as he began collecting his carpet cleaning equipment. I shook his hand, waived him in and got back to my studies in the front room of the house.

He passed by a few times as he was setting up his equipment and each time he passed by, I would look up and watch as he was sizing up his surroundings. His eyes glanced at my bible on the table. He recognized the cross I have hanging on my wall. After a few more trips by my table, I could tell by his nervous demeanor that he wanted to get finished with my house as soon as possible.

It was almost like he was saying to himself: “Not only did we have to squeeze this guy in at the last minute, but now I run the risk of this bible thumper trying to save my soul.” Some of you may recognize that look and the ensuing body language. He gathered all his stuff and came by one more time to ask me which room I would like him to do first. It was then that he saw my Hebrew studies book. He stopped, pointed at it and asked me why I was learning Hebrew?

I told Saja that I was a seminary student and learning Greek and Hebrew is a part of my education. In one movement, he sat down, relaxed and let himself rest for a minute. And then he told me his story: It turns out that Saja, who was born in India, spent a majority of his life as a Jew in Israel. He experienced all of the terrorism of that region. As an Indian born Jew, he was never fully accepted by his peers and felt like an outcast most of his life. When he was old enough and had saved up enough money, he moved to this country in the hopes of practicing the American ideal of religious freedom. What he found was more resistance to his faith from Christians who were constantly telling him that his beliefs were wrong and that he had to change, simply because he was different from them. He said: “They are not worried about me or my soul, they are concerned only with themselves and their own comfort and that everyone believes exactly as they do.” It was obvious he was troubled by this observation.

After all this, I understood his trepidation when he saw me studying my bible and viewed my cross on the wall. But when we started talking about the Hebrew language and he learned that Christian ministers learn the language of his faith, we suddenly had a bond. Through the barriers of his exhaustion and the barriers of his cultural

experiences, a Christian and a Jew found a commonality. He experienced a small bit of healing. I experienced a small bit of healing...some healing I did not even know I needed. And boy did my carpets get clean!

Jesus heals the lepers and frees them from their unclean bonds. But the story doesn't stop there. One from the group, A Samaritan man, turns back, goes prostrate in front of Jesus and gives thanks for the miracle he receives. The fact that he is a Samaritan carries some importance, for in this day, Jews and Samaritans did not associate. Samaritans were unclean, on the level of "tax collectors and sinners," and they were outsiders in the primarily Jewish region. But this Samaritan man receives healing, just the same as the other 9, presumably Jewish lepers. He experiences no barriers to this miracle. Jesus treats him equally. And for this he is so very grateful.

Naaman, in the Old Testament reading, was also an outsider. He hears about a Prophet in Samaria, one who might be able to heal his skin affliction. He gathers up his entourage and pulls up to Elisha's house, requesting a miracle. What he gets is a message, not a grand gesture from the holy man. He is told to dip himself 7 times in the Jordan River and his leprosy will be healed.

After realizing that his expectations are misguided, he is upset by the notion that this is all it takes for him to be cured. They have prettier and mightier rivers where he comes from, why dip himself in the Jordan? But after the encouragement from his servants, he does the faithful thing and he is healed.

Just like the Samaritan in the New Testament story, Naaman exhibits faith and is rewarded with a miracle. But something more happens to these two men. While their sickness is healed, it seems they also experience healing that goes beyond skin deep...some emotional and spiritual cleansing. And by their reactions...this...they did not expect.

Naaman, the great warrior and conqueror, returns to the Prophet and professes his thanks and allegiance to the one true God of Israel. Similarly, the Samaritan man, returns with great thanksgiving and praise. He falls at the feet of Jesus, for he is an outsider, yet he finds acceptance and healing. There were no barriers to their release from the bondage of their suffering. Naaman's step of faith, with encouragement from his servants, made him well. As Jesus says to the Samaritan: "Your faith has made you well." On the surface, this seems like Jesus is repeating himself, since he is already cured of his leprosy. But that is not all he receives. He is now released from the bondage of his non-inclusiveness. He is completely and holistically accepted within the miracle he receives from Jesus. Jesus accepts us as we are. Who in here needs to be included? Will our faith also make us well?

Perhaps the better question this morning is: who is the Samaritan in your life? Who is the person to whom you need to show the love of Jesus, to include them and to heal them with love and acceptance? Teens, is it the shy and quiet student who gets picked on everyday for being a little bit different. Are they socially unacceptable to you? How can you reach out to them and show them a love without barriers? Adults, who is this person for you? Maybe there's a man or woman at work, who keep to themselves and desperately needs you to show them that you know they exist. Families, do you have a prodigal son or daughter? Is there a cousin, aunt, uncle, father or mother, who by their actions or words, are no longer acceptable to the rest of the family? Can you be the bearer of healing, through the love of Christ, and welcome them back to the fold?

These are difficult questions. But they are questions that we must ask. Because I know in my life I have been and will be someone who needs that this love. Most of you probably have and will again need this kind of love.

I have a confession to make. When I left the position at my last church, I had no intention, of coming back to Smoke Rise to be a part of this congregation. This is a difficult confession, as I am very fond of this church and its people. I've been a member since my family moved to Atlanta in 1984 and I owe a lot of who I am today to the experiences I had here and the people I knew and know.

Over the last two years, I worked in a two different church contexts and branched out fully into my seminary education. I found over that time that I had convictions I did not think I could cultivate or nurture in this church. But then I came back one Sunday to teach my father's class, as he was out of town. It just happened to be the same Sunday of the teachers meeting announcing the church theme for the year...the Micah challenge. I felt energy and vitality that day, something that took me by surprise. I knew about the mission ventures the church is involved in but I had not perceived a church wide direction, like I noticed that day. Do Justice. Love Mercy. Walk

Humbly. I left thinking to myself: Maybe this IS a congregation that is ready to step out and be the healing presence of Christ in this community. Maybe this IS a church ready to meet and accept the diversity which surrounds it. Maybe this IS a church body, ready to take risks and do what feels a little bit uncomfortable...but is in the spirit of Christ.

For me, the lesson here today is that the healing God offers humanity is holistic healing. This includes spirit and soul as well as body and mind. This is terrific news for the church and for Christians, who desperately wish to be the presence of Christ. But sometimes there are barriers to it. Barriers humanity constructs.

If you have ever spent any time in a hospital, perhaps a cancer ward or a brain injury unit, one thing you may notice is that you see all kinds of people there who are all seeking only one thing...healing. In this shared pursuit, the pursuit of the release from suffering and sickness, there are no races, religions or cultures. There are just people, people who form a small community of support, love and acceptance.

I cannot help but think that humanity should begin to think like the people in this hospital ward, because in our suffering, in all of our iniquities and in all of our weakness, we desperately need healing. Maybe this mentality can begin the process of kicking down the socially constructed barriers that exist in our world. As the church, the universal body of Christ, this is our task. We may not have the power to do miraculous healing as Jesus did. But we can be the presence of Christ in reconciliation, in acceptance, in inclusiveness and in love for one another.

My whole life, I've heard preachers and teachers talk about being the presence of Christ unto the world. I used to wonder what they meant. Was it just a Sunday school statement? I know now that it is not. We must decide to live life without fragmentation. We must reach out and break through the barriers set by our culture. We can be the healing presence of Christ in our time. Maybe then the church can begin to fulfill its mission as it was originally intended.

Amen.

Scripture for this sermon: 2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15 & Luke 17:11-19