

Thanks But No Thanks
sermon by Stan Dotson
Circle of Mercy, Oct 9, 2016
Luke 17:11-19

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

Along with this text from Luke's gospel, I've been reading and wrestling with another text this week, James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. It's a book my friend Greg Jarrell and other justice leaders in Charlotte are reading, and I'm participating in the "book club" from afar. So let me add to Luke's gospel some excerpts from the good news (or bad news, depending on your perspective) according to James Baldwin:

The spreading of the Gospel, regardless of the motives or the integrity or the heroism of some of the missionaries, was an absolutely indispensable justification for the planting of the flag. Priests and nuns and school-teachers helped to protect and sanctify the power that was so ruthlessly being used.

In order to survive... America and all the Western nations will be forced to reexamine themselves and release themselves from many things that are now taken to be sacred, and to discard nearly all the assumptions that have been used to justify their lives and their anguish and their crimes for so long.

Speaking of the time he spent as a preacher, Baldwin discovered that: *The blood of the Lamb had not cleansed me in any way whatsoever. I was just as black as I had been the day that I was born. Therefore, when I faced a congregation, it began to take all the strength I had not to stammer, not to curse, not to tell them to throw away their Bibles and get off their knees and go home and organize, for example, a rent strike.*

In the Baptist tradition I grew up in, sermons always ended with an invitation. But I want to extend the invitation before beginning the sermon, an invitation for people of faith in the U.S.: *Let's all move to Cuba!* —but not for the reasons you might think. People of faith in our nation, across all lines of difference, all have something in common: we live and move and have our being in the privileged world of empire, and that produces certain assumptions. These assumptions cross the spectrum, rich, poor, conservative, liberal, black white, latino, straight, lgbtq, we have all been infected with this sacred ideal of *America*. Some think we need to go back to a golden age when the ideal was

presumably real; others think we need to move forward and continue the project of establishing a more perfect union, so that all can fully enjoy its promised benefits. Moving to a place where those assumed privileges are not shared would be good for the soul.

Also before beginning the sermon I want to offer a disclaimer that may help explain the invitation— a disclaimer about the limitations of language. One of the most important life learning experiences for me has happened in these past few years, as I have struggled mightily to gain some facility in the Spanish language, particularly the Cuban version of the language. Getting a handle on grammar and building vocabulary is not enough. There's all sorts of coded language, *doble sentido* (double meaning), and idiomatic expressions that make no literal sense. It has been a spiritual lesson like no other to live and move and have my being in a place where I generally do not know what is going on, where I have to rely on a lot of guesswork, and when I do get something right, I chalk it up to grace, or blind luck.

The problem with reading the Bible through the lens of imperial citizenship with all its assumptions and privileges, is that we tend to read the Jesus stories as first language texts, in our native tongue, and they almost always come out confirming and supporting our native biases, assumptions, privileges. It's not just a contemporary American problem. For the past fifteen hundred years, every empire has had its priests and pastors remove the prophetic and political punch of the texts, and instead personalize/pietize/romanticize/nostalgicize the Jesus story to justify the fundamental assumptions of whatever flag has been planted in whatever land. The problem is, the Bible is not a native text for us or any other empire. We need to learn to read the Bible as a second or third or fourth language narrative, which means we really don't know what's going on and need a lot of help to get past guesswork. Knowing the grammar and vocabulary is not enough. *Doble sentido* and idiomatic references fill the pages.

Back to my invitation, and one reason why I am extending it: Spending time reading the Bible in Cuba, with Cubans who did not share my assumptions or sacred ideals, broke the narrative open in ways I could never have imagined. And to use James Baldwin's words, it forced me "to reexamine myself and release myself and to begin to discard the assumptions that have been used to justify my life and my anguish and my crimes for so long." A year in Cuba was a good start to the release, but I can't claim my liberation is fully realized. So, to the extent that I still harbor some of those assumptions of privilege, any genuine insights or inspiration you might gain from this look at a Jesus story will have to be chalked up to grace, or blind luck.

With that disclaimer and the invitation in mind, here's the sermon.

As kind of a cantankerous and contrary kid who liked to buck authority, I came to dread hearing this particular Jesus story, the healing of the ten lepers. It was a popular one in my childhood, used in every setting: sermons, Sunday School, Baptist Training Union, vacation Bible school, Royal Ambassadors, and it was always exploited for the same purpose: to instill good manners. Remember to say *thank you*. This story was the

proof-text for every parental voice, whenever somebody gave you something or did something for you and you began to enjoy it, you'd invariably hear, *What do you say?* "Thank you." As I said, I came to dread hearing the story, and I was glad my teachers had not been able to find similar Jesus stories related to saying "please" or "excuse me" or not passing gas in public.

But like most all the Jesus stories, when you peel away the personal piety and the miss manners morality and domesticated imperial etiquette, there is a prophetic and political punch. The clues in this odd healing story—healing from a distance—come in the language used to describe the healing, in Jesus' instruction, and in the probable reason why one of the ten ignored Jesus' instruction.

The story tells us that Jesus instructed the ten lepers to go show themselves to the priests, and on their way they were made clean. Let's unpack the clues: Within the larger occupying Roman empire and its system of regulating human behavior, there was the micro-empire of the Jewish temple with its own system of regulating behavior, via the role of priests who were granted the power to declare people clean or unclean. In essence, they had the power to determine who's in and who's out. The clean had access to health care, to jobs, to education, to distribution of goods, to rituals, to the privileges of participation in the life of the community. The unclean were denied access. So it was a big deal to be clean. And there were a lot of things that would jeopardize your status, skin disease being one of them.

Jesus essentially was instructing the ten to go engage that system, to challenge it, because he had done something outside the system. He had made them clean, something only the temple priests were authorized to do. The nine who followed Jesus' instruction to go to the priests probably did not have challenge on their mind; more likely they were excited and in a hurry to re-enter the world of privilege, to regain acceptance and be reintegrated in the established system.

The Samaritan, who also was made clean from leprosy, knew that he had no reason to go to priests. For he had been cured of one skin disease, but not another. He still wore the skin of his race. Whatever solidarity the nine had had with this Samaritan because of their common suffering dissolved when they were cleansed, because he was still a Samaritan, which was another disqualifier from entrance into the world of privilege. You can hear James Baldwin's words echoing there: "The blood of the Lamb had not cleansed me. I was just as black as I had been the day that I was born."

When the Samaritan realized this same truth, that he he would still be victimized by discrimination and exclusion, he knew that he had no reason to engage the system. So he turned back and engaged Jesus instead. And while Jesus had cleansed and cleared the other nine for re-entrance into imperial citizenship, he did something more profound for the Samaritan. Jesus blessed him and said, your faith has made you *well*. He didn't say, your faith has *cleansed* you. He said, you are *whole*. Keep moving, you're *saved*. Being whole, being well, being saved, doesn't rely on membership or participation in the system. It doesn't rely on being clean. Perhaps Jesus at that moment remembered the

words of his favorite prophet, Isaiah, *A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way, the unclean shall not miss it, they shall not pass it by, it shall be for them.**

This all raises an important question about Jesus' ministry and identity. Was he a trying to revamp an established order, or was he creating something new? That is, was he a *reformer* or a *revolutionary*? Was he dreaming of ways to tweak the system, to make the establishment work in a more just way? Did he foster hope that if only they had a different Caesar with a more peaceful platform, if only they could have a governor who embodied more equitable ideals, a Herod with more compassion, if only there was a more inclusive set of priests, a court of Sanhedrin who judged more equitably and fairly, then they could establish a more perfect union? Or was Jesus a radical, not aiming to establish anything, but creating a fluid movement that would cross all established boundaries?

When you peel away the personal piety facade designed to reinforce good imperial manners, the pattern of the gospel stories reveals a relentless clamoring call to cease complicity in the system, to disengage from the empire both large and small and discard its assumptions. It's there throughout the story, for those who have second language ears to hear. When Jesus left his carpentry work, he wasn't just letting go of a nice woodworking shop making candlesticks and furniture for his neighbors, he was saying *no thanks* to the imperial construction project that exploited the Nazareth tradesmen to build another Roman city just three miles down the road. When he called James and John and Peter and Andrew to leave their nets, he wasn't just luring a group of weekend fly-fishermen to let go of their hobby, he was challenging them to say *no thanks* to the huge fishing industry that exploited the Galilee lake workers for their imperial export business.

Basically, Jesus was calling people whose energies, whose psyches, whose hopes and dreams and fears were directed at the established system, either in complicit participation like the tax collectors or in armed resistance like the zealots, to re-direct their energies, their psyches, their hopes and dreams and fears, way from the establishment and toward a movement, an unestablished network of compassion care, that would always be on the go.

All this leads me to question: what is capturing our attention these days, what is claiming our allegiance, what draws our energy these days? *The hopes and fears of all our years* — are they met in a little child of Bethlehem, or in the prospects of who might be holding office in the empire? Do we invest ourselves in the fate of the imperial project, or the movement? Are we out to establish a more perfect union, or to create a community of compassion that crosses all established boundaries?

I know that all those might seem like false dichotomies to many — why can't the movement be about establishing this more perfect union? I've spent most of my life thinking that this was our call. Maybe so. Or maybe not. I'm beginning to believe that it's virtually impossible, or as highly unlikely as a camel walking through the eye of a needle, as it is for us to heed James Baldwin's call and *release ourselves from the*

things that are now taken to be sacred, and to discard nearly all the assumptions that have been used to justify our lives, without leaving, without experiencing life in a land where people don't share our language, our assumptions, our sacred ideals. Maybe the possibilities of being made well can't happen while we are intent on being clean and on declaring others clean for the world of privilege.

There are lots of communities and people around the world who could help liberate us from our assumptions of privilege. I mention the Cubans just because I have experienced some of their liberating power. And it's not because of their system of government. They, like the Jews of old, have their small empire in the shadow of the giant empire as well. Woven into their established order is the utopian dream of creating a more perfect union. But here's the difference: the church in Cuba has never been part of the official dream; the church has not been considered clean, it has not been cleared for privilege like it has here. So the people of faith there have been forced to be part of a movement, not an establishment. They have a lot to teach us.

So maybe it's time to think about moving to Cuba, to be released from the world of privilege and experience a movement of compassion care. Lots of folks today are thinking about moving when they consider the prospects of a raving lunatic at the helm of our establishment. I suspect, though, that it would be more important to think about living in exile if our ideal candidate was in power. Remember, James Baldwin wrote his critique during the age of Camelot, when JFK was in office. So if Bernie or Elizabeth Warren were ever to be in the White House, if there were nine Ruth Beder Ginsburg types on the Supreme Court, if we had a State House full of John Agers and Holly Jones, that would be the time for those of us on the left side of the faith spectrum to flee for our lives, because it would be so much harder to find release from those ideals we hold sacred, to discard our assumptions. But, given that we're not likely to be faced with that temptation any time soon, now is as good a time as any. *Vamos. Vamos.* Let's go.

*This translation of Isaiah 35:8 is from Walter Harrelson, one of the translators of the New Revised Standard Version. Before his death, he spoke about his excitement in translating this particular verse, discovering that the traditional translation that the unclean would *not* be on the Holy Way was erroneous. His study of the Hebrew in the context of other similar teachings in Isaiah led convinced him that the prophet actually was giving one of the most inclusive images found in all scripture, that even the unclean and the fools would not miss out on traveling the Way; it would be for them. Being such a radical change in translation, the editorial board decided they could only include it as a footnote alternative reading.