

**Glenview Community Church
Glenview, Illinois**

**Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
9 October 2022**

Luke 17:11-19

The Samaritan's Praise

A Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. James M. Matarazzo, Jr.

Text: 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.'" (Luke 17:11-19)

I. The Context

In last Sunday's Gospel reading from Luke, the disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith, but he disappoints them and offers nothing that would do so. However, in this miracle story, the disciples witness Jesus's healing ten men of leprosy. Leprosy has affected humanity for thousands of years, but today it is a rare and curable illness. Historically, leprosy which affects the skin and can cause deformity over time, carried high stigma. Persons who contacted it were ostracized and were forced to keep distance from others. They often lived with other lepers in a group. Leprosy is one of the least contagious diseases known to humanity so generally people with leprosy cannot pass it easily to others, but no one knew this at the time. In the Middle Ages and until the late 19th century, it was often monks and nuns who looked after lepers in what were known as leper colonies. A somewhat recent example of this is a man known as Fr Damien De Veuster, a Belgian Catholic priest, served the needs of the people in a leper colony on

the island of Molokai in the Kingdom of Hawaii from 1873-1889. He eventually contracted the illness and died from it. He was declared a saint by Pope Benedict in 2009 and is known to Catholics now as St Damien of Molokai. (Hawaii was annexed as a US territory in 1893).

In the Hebrew Bible, leprosy was known as *tsaraath* (צָרַעַת) and according to the Book of Leviticus, a person with this condition was unclean: *“Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ As long as they have the disease, they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp. (Lev. 13:44-46 NIV)* Thus, such persons, such as these 10 men, were cut off from family life, community, synagogue, and temple unless they were cured. Only a priest could declare a person cured and thus clean.

In this context, these men are cured by Jesus. They go to show themselves to the priest who will declare them clean. They can return to the community. But one of the ten is not a Jew, but a Samaritan. He turns back to praise God and to thank Jesus. He would not have gone to the Jewish priests. Samaritans had their own priests and their own temple. So, who are the Samaritans that appear rather often in the gospels?

II. Who are the Samaritans?

The Samaritans (Hebrew: *Shamerim* שְׁמֵרִים, “Guardians [of the Torah]”) are an ethnoreligious group originating from the Israelites (or Hebrews). They consider themselves Israelites but not Jews. It is often assumed that a Samaritan is from Samaria, a province in the Holy Land that today equates to the West Bank. But while their name in English does relate to Samaria and it is their homeland, they prefer to call themselves “Guardians of the Torah” (Hebrew: *Shamerim haTorah*).

The unified Kingdom of Israel was divided into two kingdoms after the death of King Solomon around 930 BC. The northern kingdom was called the Kingdom of Israel with its capital and temple at Shechem. Today, Shechem is near the Palestinian city of Nablus. The southern kingdom was called the Kingdom of Judah with its capital and temple in Jerusalem. The word ‘Jew’ stems from the word Judah (in Hebrew *Yehudah*). In other words, modern Jews are all members of the Tribe of Judah and are hence *Yehudim* or in English “Jews.”

By contrast, Samaritans claim they descend from the Israelite tribes of the northern Kingdom of Israel. The northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrian Empire in 720 BC, about 210 years after it was founded. The Samaritans believe they are descendants of Israelites who were not deported by the Assyrian Empire after the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel. They remained in the Holy Land. They consider their religion to be the true religion of ancient Israel. They regard Judaism as a closely related but altered religion. Samaritans also regard Mount Gerizim (near both Nablus and biblical Shechem), and not the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, to be the holiest place on earth.

Jews today trace their lineage to the southern Kingdom of Judah and insist that Jerusalem, where the temple once stood, is the holiest place on earth. The Kingdom of Judah resisted the Assyrians, but it fell to the Babylonian Empire in 587 BC – 133 years after the fall of the northern kingdom. The Babylonians deported part of the population of Judah to other parts of the empire and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. Jerusalem remained uninhabited for 75 years or so. In 531 BC, the Persian Empire conquered Babylon and the exiled Jews were allowed to return to Judah and rebuild the temple. So, now you know where the term 'Jews' comes in and how it is associated with the religion of Israel and modern Judaism.

Rabbinical Judaism, the Judaism we know today, developed from the Kingdom of Judah and its remnants. The Hebrew Bible or Old Testament as a collection of 39 books comes from Judaism. The Samaritan Bible only has the Torah – the first five books of Old Testament, that is: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. They do not regard the other books as divinely inspired and consider them human writings. Both religions claim that the other is less pure. The Jews deemed the Samaritans suspect because they remained in land occupied by the Assyrian Empire for centuries. They assumed that the Samaritans engaged in intermarriage with non-Israelites and were influenced by pagan religions. The Samaritans in turn thought of the Jews as less pure because they were exiled to Babylon, leaving the Land of Israel, where they were subject to Babylonian and Persian influences and presumably intermarried with locals. However, the Jews were and are far greater in number than the Samaritans and had far greater power under the Persian Empire and later under the Romans. At the time of Jesus, Samaritans were not accepted as having true Israelite religion and were deemed foreigners. There was a strong degree of discrimination against them, even though they

professed the same religion, the same God, the same Torah, and the same ancestry tracing back to Abraham.

So, the ‘foreigner’ that Jesus speaks of is the healed Samaritan. And this is important. For the Jews at the time, the Messiah was coming only for them. Not for the Samaritans or anyone else. Jesus is indeed a Jew, of the house of Judah. But Jesus makes it a point to speak to, heal, and otherwise include Samaritans and even pagans like Romans. This would have been deeply offensive to his audience. When he credits the healed Samaritan with praising God, he is saying implicitly the Samaritan is praising the God of Israel – that indeed this God is his God as much as the God of the Jewish people. And by kneeling at the feet of Jesus, the Samaritan is implicitly recognizing that Jesus is the Messiah – and by extension, the Messiah of Samaritans as well. His disciples would have been surprised if not scandalized by this. It was only much later, around 500 AD, that the Talmud declared that Samaritans were to be deemed Jews even if not orthodox in belief. Today, they are accepted as Jews by rabbinical authorities, but to join mainstream Judaism, Samaritans must ritually convert. Samaritans at the time of Jesus numbered in the hundreds of thousands, but today there are only 840 left living in two communities in the Holy Land. By contrast, there are 15.3 million Jews of which 6.8 million live in the State of Israel.

III. Samaritan Praise

It’s difficult to grasp what is going on in this story today. At that time, to the Jewish mind, the only way to worship the one true God was to be a Jew. God did not reveal Godself to other nations or other religions. Yet, Jesus accepts the praise that the Samaritan offers. And by saying “your faith has made you well,” he accepts the Samaritan’s faith. By doing so, Jesus is saying that God is the God of all nations, of all people, even lepers – even those in despised minorities. Therefore, stories like the Good Samaritan mean so much more than quaint Sunday School lessons about human kindness. Jesus is extending the Commonwealth of Israel, the ancestry of Abraham, the kingdom of God, and his own work of salvation to everyone, everywhere.

What does this day to us today? I think it says that whatever today’s outcaste group is, these are our modern Samaritans – and our Lord’s demand is clear. We are to embrace the outsider in our midst, especially if they are not accepted by the world. Their names

may not be Samaritan – maybe it is refugee, or immigrant, or illegal alien, or homeless, or transgender, or non-binary, or a combination of identities, or ethnicities. Their praise is equal to anyone's. This house of God then must be their temple - with the doors wide open to them; and we must be their sisters and brothers, with our arms ready to embrace them. In effect, we must also be like Father Damien – willing to accept people who others reject and live among them. I believe in doing so we manifest the operation of God's grace in our lives.

To God alone be honor and glory, power and dominion, world without end. Amen.