

Sermon for Zion, February 9, 2020

Hymns: 299 – Holy, Holy, Holy; 303 - Holy Holy Holy (My Heart Adores You); 644 – May the Mind of Christ my Saviour; 585 – Christ, you call us all to service

Scripture: Luke 17:11-19; Acts 10:1-4

Sermon Title: The Faith of a Foreigner

*Luke 17:11-19*

*Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus travelled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, 'Jesus, Master, have pity on us!'*

*When he saw them, he said, 'Go, show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were cleansed.*

*One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him – and he was a Samaritan.*

*Jesus asked, 'Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?' Then he said to him, 'Rise and go; your faith has made you well.'*

*Acts 10:1-4*

*At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, 'Cornelius!'*

*Cornelius stared at him in fear. 'What is it, Lord?' he asked.*

*The angel answered, 'Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.'*

I'm leading a pilgrimage to Greece and Turkey from April 28 to May 12 this year. There are a couple of spots left – you should come! We will visit the places where the Apostle Paul established congregations, where the Gospel spread from the Middle East through to Europe and ultimately to us. We will also visit the sites of the Seven Churches written about in the first few chapters of the Book of the Revelation, for an amazing glimpse into the life of the earliest believers. So much of the New Testament will come to life, as we stand in the very places where Christianity took root, flourished, and grew.

Our time will be split between Greece and Turkey. Greece is a predominantly Christian country, and Turkey, while in many ways the early cradle of Christianity, is

now predominantly Muslim. That said, it is not difficult to be a Christian tourist in Turkey – they are happy to see you, and welcome you, and hope you’ll spend lots of Euros – but it is a challenge to be a Christian and live there. You’re definitely a minority. A very small minority.

One sure sign of being in a Muslim country is hearing the Call to Prayer. Muslims are instructed to pray five times a day, and each of these times is announced by the Muezzin singing the call to prayer, the “Adhan.” Those minarets you see around mosques are where the muezzin would stand; nowadays, rather than muezzins, loudspeakers sit atop the minarets. One very early morning in Istanbul, I discovered that one of these loudspeakers was located directly across the street from my fifth floor hotel window. Five a.m., and I sat bolt upright in bed, my hair standing straight on end, as it sounded as though the muezzin was giving a high-volume call to prayer right in my ear.

As you can imagine, this was a topic of heated conversation at breakfast. Several of my fellow pilgrims were less than happy, and a couple of them complained at the desk. The manager patiently explained that he was unable to change the Muslim prayer laws for the convenience of the tourists. As the leader of the pilgrimage, I was asked to do something about it. “I did,” I said. “What did you do?” asked my irate fellow pilgrim. “I prayed,” I said.

I then encouraged the group to take advantage of the 5 times per day reminders to pray. “That’s what church bells were for, a long time ago,” I said. “They called people to service, and to prayer.” I challenged the group to take the lesson of more frequent prayer to heart. “When you hear the morning call to prayer, thank God for the new day. At the evening call, thank God for the day you’ve had. For the other times, maybe say a prayer for loved ones back home, or for people you know who are sick, or for the people of this country to learn about Jesus. There’s plenty to pray for, and now you have five reminders to do so.”

The grumpy member of our group said, “I don’t need foreigners to tell me how to pray.” But if Luke, writer of our Gospel, were there, I think he’d respond with the very story we read about this morning.

You heard it a few minutes ago: Jesus is entering a village, when he’s confronted by ten poor souls suffering with leprosy. They beg to be healed; and Jesus answers their prayers. He tells them to “*go and show yourselves to the priests,*” who, as the Centre for Disease Control of that era, could declare them officially healed, and allow them to be reintegrated into the life of the community. And then we hear this:

*One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him – and he was a Samaritan.*

*Jesus asked, 'Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?' Then he said to him, 'Rise and go; your faith has made you well.'*

Remember from past sermons that Samaritans were not highly regarded in Israel – they were, in fact, despised. They were considered intruders, unwanted, with religious practices regarded as a perversion of the truth. But this Samaritan was the only one who bothered to return and thank Jesus. “*Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?*” asks Jesus.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is another example Jesus uses to demonstrate that we can learn from and be challenged by the attitude and practices of others. Luke, perhaps because he was a foreigner himself, highlights such stories. Listing them all would make a great study, but a long sermon, so I'll settle for just one more – the Centurion Cornelius. Same author – Luke; different book – the Acts of the Apostles. Listen again, as Luke sets the scene:

*At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment.*

If you thought the Samaritans were hated, then by golly you haven't met the Romans. They were the foreign oppressors, the brutal extorters and enslavers of the people, the “blood and iron” waking nightmare, the conquerors who had laid the land waste numerous times, and who would utterly destroy Jerusalem and enslave the population just a few years after the close of the Gospels. And Luke introduces us to a Roman officer, of the Italian regiment no less, in the powerful Pagan city of Caesarea Maritima. And here's how Luke describes him:

*He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.*

Not what we would expect to hear. Not what Luke's audience in Israel would like to hear. And then this:

*One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, 'Cornelius!'*

*Cornelius stared at him in fear. 'What is it, Lord?' he asked.*

*The angel answered, 'Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.'*

This leads into Cornelius being directed to invite Peter, no less, to come and visit, and Peter (reluctantly) does, and preaches the Gospel to Cornelius, his family, and numerous gathered friends. All become Christian; not only that, it is this event that leads Peter to understand that the Gospel is not just for those of Jewish faith and descent, but for all the world. For us. It is the faith and conversion of the despised and hated foreigner Cornelius that paved the way for you and me to be welcomed into the family of God.

Throughout the New Testament, the examples of faith exhibited by foreigners challenges the notion that we can learn nothing from others. Regarding another Centurion, Jesus says (Luke 7:9), *"I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel."* It turns out that the example of those of other faiths can sometimes teach us – and challenge us – how to be better Christians. Or perhaps I should say, the example of those of other faiths can sometimes remind us of what Jesus taught us about how to be faithful in following him.

Chapter 17, in which we find our reading for today, is all about the characteristics of faithful followers. Oftentimes – sadly - these characteristics are demonstrated more clearly by those outside the Christian faith than by those within the family of believers.

For instance, the chapter begins with the admonition to “Do No Harm.” Listen (17:1-3): *Then Jesus said to his disciples, "It is inevitable that there should be pitfalls, but alas for the man who is responsible for them! It would be better for that man to have a mill-stone hung round his neck and be thrown into the sea, than that he should trip up one of these little ones. So be careful how you live."*

If you were to ask a non-churchgoer which religious faith best exemplifies the principle of “Do No Harm,” don’t be surprised if they answer “Buddhism,” rather than Christianity. Even here on Prince Edward Island, not exactly the world centre of Buddhism, the recently established Buddhist monasteries and schools are very effectively spreading their concept of reducing suffering, among people as well as animals. The Buddhists within our midst, with their reputation of gentleness, are a challenge to us to do a better job of living this Christian virtue.

Another of Jesus’ teachings in Luke 17 (vss 3-4) concerns forgiveness. *"If your brother offends you, take him to task about it, and if he is sorry, forgive him. Yes, if he*

*wrongs you seven times in one day and turns to you and says, 'I am sorry' seven times, you must forgive him.*" In this area, rather than look to other faiths, it is important to us to look within ourselves. What do we hold in our hearts? What resentments and grudges do we have against others? How ready are we to forgive?

Examples from other faiths do challenge us. You may remember the shooting in the Pittsburgh area synagogue which took the lives of 11 worshippers and badly injured 6 others. One year later, one of those who were wounded but survived after weeks of hospitalization, Dan Leger, spoke at a Yom Kippur service. He said, "There is a need for us to be able to express forgiveness to ourselves in addition to the person because if you don't do that, it lives inside you, it eats you up, it makes you do bad things, it gives you many bad thoughts. You have to be able to move past that in some way. And so being able to forgive is that thing that gives you the ability to move forward." Examples such as these challenge us to recover the centrality of forgiveness in our own faith.

Following the admonition to always seek to grow our faith (Luke 17:5-6), Jesus tells a surprising parable about "Duty." I'll bet you've never heard it before (Luke 17:7-10): "*When a servant comes in from plowing or taking care of sheep, does his master say, 'Come in and eat with me'? No, he says, 'Prepare my meal, put on your apron, and serve me while I eat. Then you can eat later.'* And does the master thank the servant for doing what he was told to do? Of course not. In the same way, when you obey me you should say, *'We are unworthy servants who have simply done our duty.'*"

Jesus said that? Jesus said that! So often, we consider our duties as optional, based on what appeals to us at the moment, and then we await the expressions of gratitude and thanksgiving which we feel we are owed. And if those expressions of gratitude and thanksgiving aren't forthcoming, we're unlikely to serve again. But Jesus had a different concept of Christian service: he considered it a duty.

Islam, in its purest form, has this at its core. The very word "Islam" means "submission to God." The form of prayer followed by devout Muslims – kneeling and bowing – is designed to be a reminder of that very concept. Sadly, heinous acts of oppression, terror and violence perpetrated by radical Muslims have made it nearly impossible for us to see any of the more positive teachings which are actually there. Nevertheless, when it comes to "submission to God" – truly regarding God as God, and Jesus as not only Saviour but as Lord – we Christians often don't make very willing servants. The parable we just heard, which is strange to our ears, is one we have managed to filter out of our consciousness as to what makes for a faithful disciple.

We're better, I think, at being thankful. The story of the ten lepers, only one of whom expressed gratitude, is easier for us to grab hold of. But have you ever thought of the other nine? What's with them? Well, I'm sure they were very thankful to be healed of their disease. The point of the parable is that only one – the Samaritan foreigner – took the time to express gratitude to God in a tangible way. Lots of us, when we are in illness, crisis or need, are ready, like the ten lepers, to call upon God for help. Many of us make promises – “If you get me through this, God, I'll never miss a Sunday again, and I'll volunteer to teach Sunday School, and etc etc.” But when the crisis is past, our focus drifts away, our commitment falters. “*Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?*” asked Jesus. May he never have cause to ask it of us.

The Cornelius passage from Acts adds two more characteristics of faithful followers. Cornelius, despite being Roman, was described as “*devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.*” Further, we are told that his “*prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.*” God hears us when we pray. God hears everyone when they pray. And prayer draws us closer to God. And generosity to those in need is regarded by God as “a memorial offering,” which is to say, “In remembering the needy, O Lord, I remember you; and so, O Lord, remember me.” And God remembered Cornelius; and through his conversion, the door was open for people of all lands to come to faith.

Do no harm; extend forgiveness; grow your faith; serve willingly; be thankful; exercise generosity; pray regularly. These are all characteristics of faithful followers of Jesus, and characteristics each of us needs to grow. The positive examples set by those of other faiths can often challenge us to do better, to try harder, to deepen our commitment. Sometimes, it is the example within the family of faith which can inspire us: the way a neighbour or friend from another Christian denomination practices their faith can cause us to think about how our Presbyterian expression of faith can be enriched. I know that my travels in Korea made a big impression upon me, and showed me, in many cases, what total commitment really looks like.

Remember the grumpy guy from my tour? When I challenged the group to use the Muslim calls to prayer as reminders for us to pray, he said, “I suppose you want to become a Muslim.” I responded, “No; through more frequent prayer, I hope to become a better Christian.”

Through the faith of others, may God both inspire and challenge us to be stronger disciples, and faithful followers of Jesus. Amen.