

Clear Stained Glass Window

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With few exceptions, Cathedrals, Churches, Mosques, Synagogues and houses of worship throughout the world have beautifully adorned Stained Glass Windows. And Choir members... whether stained glass or clear windows, they all get hot. One of the things which awed Judy and I coming to worship and join this congregation, is the transparency. We are not hidden in a locked Upper Room or set apart in an ivory tower, but looking out into the world. Among my favorite Psalms are the words: "I lift up my eyes unto the hills, from whence does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." Our faith is not a private hobby, or a diversion for one hour per week, this is a congregation who witness the glory of God's creation: asking for help in the struggles of life; sincerely grateful for grace and blessings in life; who are open to being continually awed, surprised and blessed. So I was especially intrigued this week to learn from a German Pastor, that there are three prayers in the Christian life: HELP ME; THANK YOU; AWE. This healing story contains each of these three.

The four Gospels provide us a consistent story including the Baptism, ministry, Communion, death and resurrection of Jesus. Except that Luke also provides several parables and circumstance, which the others do not. The Good Samaritan, The Prodigal Son, The Dishonest Steward, Lazarus and the rich man, and this reading, occur only in Luke. This is the only time Jesus is asked to heal a group of ten people at the same time, the only time Jesus heals people from a distance without touching them, the only time he heals a Samaritan. "Samaritan" was not a nice word. Samaritan was a derogatory Racial Slur. According to Luke, Jesus passed through a city of Samaritans, and because his face was set on going to Jerusalem, these people did not believe in him, and he could do very little to help them. Which is odd, because Luke's Gospel is written to worldly Christians, to Romans and Greeks and other Heathen Gentiles like us who were not born Jewish, but the Samaritans had once been Jewish. Typically in a Jewish Parable or Racial Slur, the Samaritan was the Scapegoat, the one everyone looked down upon. This is why the Parable of the Good Samaritan is so powerful, because no one would have expected the Samaritan to rescue another person.

In America, we have reference points in time like our Civil War being just over 150 years ago; our Revolutionary War with Britain being 250 years ago; the Pilgrims coming for Religious Freedom 3 centuries ago; Columbus' discovery being 425 years ago. So in the First Testament, 721 years before the birth of Jesus 2000 years ago, the Nation of Israel that had developed into a monarchy under King David, expanded into the wealthiest, most powerful Nation on the face of the Earth under Solomon, had been divided into two Nations: Israel and Judah. While the 10 tribes of Reuben, Issachar, Gad, Naphtali, Dan, Asher, Simeon, Zebulun, Manasseh and Ephraim, comprised the Northern Nation of Israel. With the Tribes of Judah and Benjamin comprising the Nation of Judah to the South. The Northern Nation of Israel was invaded, conquered, by the Assyrians. What happened to the majority of these we do not know, but in order to rule and occupy the land, the Assyrians intermarried with Israelites, as a mixed race, mixed culture and mixed religion, described as "Samaritans". Therefore, after 721 BC the only

Hebrew tribes that are left were of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin; who hated and despised the Samaritans, because they had not fought to the death or been imprisoned by the Assyrians, but had, in their words “perverted the faith, their culture, and their race by succumbing, giving up and marrying.”

134 years later in 587 BC the Babylonians invaded the Southern nation of Judah. The Babylonians not only invaded and destroyed the City of David, but after being beaten in war, the majority of the population were marched to Babylon. Today we would recognize this as walking from Southern Israel to Northern Iraq roughly 1700 miles, the distance from Nogales to Vancouver, British Columbia or Kansas City, Kansas; then after 70 years in Exile their children’s children returned home. The Samaritans offered to help them rebuild the temple, but the Jewish people said no. Such was the ostracism and segregation.

It is the beginning of Flu Season. Thankfully we have not had a true plague since the Spanish Flu of 1918 which infected 500 million people around the world, roughly 1/3 the population, killing 20 Million Americans. Leprosy or Hanson’s Disease is an infection, people did not know where it came from, adding to people’s fears and rejection. Different from a cancer attacking inside the body, Leprosy is a skin infection, eating away at your flesh, until extremities like fingers, toes, ears, lips and your nose decayed, leaving you with stubs or open sores where flesh and the instrument of senses had been. Normal ordinary people, family members, with hopes and dreams and relationships, were treated as Alien. Inhuman. Families and communities often held funerals when a person contracted leprosy, because at that point they were dead to the family. There was no known cure, and healings or restoration were so rare, that if you claimed to have been healed, before you could be readmitted to the community, you first needed to present yourself to the Priest to ascertain if you were physically and spiritually clean. According to the Book of Leviticus they believed, Leprosy was not only an infection of the body, but of the soul and mind. To be a Leper meant wearing a veil to cover your infection, a bell round your neck and crying out to others to stay at least 50 feet away.

While few of us have known those with Leprosy today, in South Sudan I did, similar to the ailments we face, there is fear. Fear that this is only the beginning. Fear that when others learn we are ill we will be rejected, perhaps rejected sounds too strong, that they will treat us differently, that they will begin to treat us as hopeless and dying. Or that they may wonder if we did something in our life to cause this, the modern words for Sin would be smoking, overweight, lack of exercise, alcohol. Recall when AIDs was first discovered in the early 1980s I worked as Chaplain in a Hospital in Harlem, where this disease was called GRID, because the population fit a grid of IV Drug-Users, Prostitutes, Homosexuals, Homeless. I recall, it was so unknown, contagious and frightening, nurses refused to touch patients or their linens and family members needed to provide care for them even within the hospital.

The first introduction we have to these people, is that from a distance they cry out to Jesus “Have Mercy on Us”. We receive many prayer requests like this. “I am going in for surgery, pray I can be healed.” “My granddaughter is pregnant, pray that the baby and she are healthy.” “I have cancer, pray for me.”

Jesus replies, “Go show yourselves to the Priest” that is, even without touching them, Jesus sends them to show the priest they are healed, they are not infectious, they are acceptable and can return to life in the community. As they go, each recognizes that fingers and ears are grown back, flesh made new. This is a vision of Heaven, where there are no illnesses, where we can throw away crutches and canes, not only being healed and being whole but being welcomed and accepted. Theologian Karl Barth stated that this is the most basic human response. Our basic response to God is not Fear or Guilt, or Doubt, but GRATITUDE. To have faith is to Believe, to live one’s faith, to Thank God by living searching the high hills

for God to come as the only real rescue. Strangely, while we each have many prayers and concerns for HELP, it is rare that we share with one another our prayers of GRATITUDE for unwarranted unmerited GRACE.

One of those who had had Leprosy stopped and instead of showing himself to the Priest returned to Jesus in thanksgiving and gratitude. The reality is, he could not have been admitted to the Temple to see the Priest, because even if cured of Leprosy, even if a Miracle had happened, he was still a Samaritan. When he had had Leprosy, he had at least been accepted into the community of the other 9 Lepers because Leprosy was worse than being a Samaritan. But now, he had no community, he was only a rejected alien in his own homeland. He returned and humbled himself before Jesus, not only having been healed, cured, but saved. I am not using that word lightly. To have lived in fear and isolation, without acceptance or communion with anyone, to be a triple Outcast; then to be accepted by Jesus, who declares "Go your way, your faith has made you well" I have no other word than in AWE to believe this one, more than all the others, went to live his life differently.

I am reminded reading these passages, that Jesus' word is to "rebuke those who have done wrong". Not to stone them, not to pile on, not even to judge others that is up to God; but we do have responsibility to rebuke and challenge one another.

Like the Servant who has done their job, like the Samaritan who is told to go his way. Our Session, our Staff, this whole congregation have addressed the Elephant that was in the room, you have cleared away all the stains and tears from our windows, to see clearly. You prayed to God for help in changing and addressing problems. WELL DONE! But, having harvested the presenting fruit, the time is now right that we could nurture blossoms to grow fruit that have never before been seen."