

God's Different Logic

Luke 17:11-18; Ruth 1:15-18

A sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

We heard the Gospel text about the ten lepers, and you may have thought it was Thanksgiving. This text is often assigned for Thanksgiving. Why the ten lepers now? We are marching through Luke. But the Lectionary Committee had no trouble leaving out the parable of the Prodigal Son because they put it elsewhere. Why the ten lepers now?

Thanksgiving in Canada is always the second Monday in October. The Lectionary sets the texts for the whole world. Around the world in the fall there are many harvest festivals, Thanksgiving festivals. Therefore we have the ten lepers today. Our Old Testament lesson is the story of Ruth.

Both stories feature an outsider. In both cases the outsider does something the better way. The Samaritan can go with the nine, or he could go say thank you to Jesus. The Jewish law required that the nine go and show themselves to the priest in order to be legally healed. Perhaps that didn't count for the Samaritan, who was not a Jew. But it was practical to have that certification. In Ruth's case it would have been practical for her to go back to her people. Naomi was poor and couldn't offer Ruth much.

You may think the message for today is: Be like the outsider in these two stories. Both of them chose the better way. We should, too. But that's not what the texts are really about.

As we look at the Bible there is a danger that we treat the Bible like a mirror. What we find in there is ourselves instead of what it actually says. Take for example Luke 17:11-19 about the ten lepers. Some years ago at a Thanksgiving service the pastor read this text, but he left out verse 16, which says: "Now he was a Samaritan." How could he leave out that sentence?! The point of the whole story is: He was a Samaritan!

Who were the Samaritans? They were like first cousins of the Jewish people. They held to the first five books of Moses. But they did not worship in Jerusalem; they worshipped at Mount Gerizim. The Jews hated them because they kept the law in their own way, not the Jewish way.

When we look at the Gospel of Luke, we see the same thing happening in Luke 10:29-37 about the Good Samaritan as happens in Luke 17 about the ten lepers. We totally misunderstand the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Jewish people knew from Leviticus 19:18 who was the neighbor. The point of the parable of the Good Samaritan is that it was a Samaritan, not that somebody did the right thing. The whole parable has to do with Jewish law. It says the priest and the Levite went on by the side because the law said you have to keep yourself ritually clean.

The same is true in the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32. That parable is falsely named "the Prodigal Son"; it's really about the two brothers. The one brother said: I've kept the law and you didn't do anything for me, and here you are doing all this for the one who went off breaking the law and even working with pigs! But God responded that what's important is that the lost has been found.

Throughout the Gospel of Luke the message is: God favors people who are not those we expect him to favor. We are like "the Jews," who follow the law and are clean. In Luke 7:32-50 there is the prostitute who washes Jesus' feet. In Luke 19:1-10 there is Zaccheus the tax collector, a hated collaborator with Rome. Jesus accepts him. Throughout Luke there is an emphasis on the poor, the weak, the downtrodden, the ill, lepers, Samaritans, all those who are overlooked in Jewish law.

In the Book of Acts (which Luke also wrote) we read in Acts 10:11-16 about the sheet full of animals coming down from heaven and how Peter said: They are unclean. And the Lord's answer is: No, they're not. I declare that those rules about clean and unclean food don't count any longer. My mercy and my way are different from what you think.

Then we come to the Book of Ruth. Ruth was King David's great grandmother (Ruth 4:17). But it is also important to realize what it says about what it means to be a member of the Jewish people. We mistakenly think the Jewish people are a kind of race. Back in 1975 there was an airlift of 80,000 black Ethiopians from Ethiopia to Israel because they were Jewish. Now there are over 120,000 Ethiopian Jews in Israel. Being Jewish is not a racial thing; it's a religious thing.

The importance of the Book of Ruth is spelled out in the first chapter of Matthew. Matthew's genealogy is very different from Luke's genealogy (3:23-38), which follows the usual pattern of the patriarchal line. In Matthew's genealogy there are four women who have a little something shady in their reputations. The first one named is Tamar, who pretended to be a prostitute (Gen 38:11), and yet she is part

of the line of David that leads to Joseph and Mary. The next one mentioned there is Rahab (Joshua 2-6), a prostitute and spy, who married an Israelite. Her son was Boaz, the husband of Ruth. The third one mentioned is Ruth. She was a Moabite. The Moabites worshipped Chemosh and practiced child sacrifice. Ruth became an Israelite. Naomi wanted to find her a new husband and urged her go to Boaz after a hard day's work and "uncover his feet" (Ruth 3:4). Eventually Boaz took Ruth as his wife.

The fourth one is Bathsheba, although Matthew does not use her name, but identifies her as "the wife of Uriah" (Matt 1:6).

As the genealogy ends, Matthew immediately goes on with: "Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Christ" (Matthew 1:16).

Again, the whole question is: How is God working? In Genesis 12:1-3 the Lord says to Abraham: "Go forth from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation and . . . by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves."

We assume that this means through the Jewish people. But no. Here we have people from Canaan (Rahab) and Moab (Ruth). If you look in Genesis 38 the person involved is Judah. He married a Canannite, Shua. The genealogy is not that kind of simple purity that we might like to think. It's all very different from our logic.

The same is true of the point made in the last chapter of Isaiah 66:23. Remember that in Genesis the Lord has said to Abraham: I will give you a land, a people, and in you shall all the nations of the world be blessed. But by the end of Isaiah, the land has disappeared, the people have all gone into exile, the temple was gone. Then comes Isaiah 66:23: "All flesh shall come to worship before me, says the Lord." It's against the way our logic, our thinking, works.

The same is true in the New Testament in an entirely different way. It never occurs to the people in the Old Testament that God himself will come. In the Old Testament there are divine appearances, called theophanies. In Gen 18 there are three angels who come to them, and then just the one speaking as the Lord (Gen 18:10, 12), but the Lord wasn't truly there; it was another theophany. It never occurred to them that God himself would truly come to be one of us.

And then to die on the cross. It's against all of our thinking, all of our logic, all of our categories. Ruth is a remarkable way of describing how it's different from our calculations and we can be thankful for that. Amen