
Where is the Holy Spirit in This Place?

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Wesley-Knox United Church

July 8, 2012
Sixth after Pentecost

Jeremiah 29: 1,4-7 Psalm 66:1-12 2 Timothy 2: 8-15 Luke 17:11-19.

We are delighted to celebrate the baptism of Callum and to receive into the family of Wesley-Knox Irene and Kristy. It is always a delight to see the circle widen.

Today's lesson is another healing story, a sort of follow on from last week's healing story in the gospel of Mark. There is much that we could talk about in this gospel story of healing and thanksgiving but the part that I wish to note this morning is that phrase of Luke "...between Samaria and Galilee...he (Jesus) met ten lepers." There is so much contemporary reality in this simple statement. All of us define our "Galilee" and most of us avoid our "Samarias." "Galilee" is that familiar place, the safe place, the accepted place, the place where we feel at home. "Samaria" is the place that is none of those. "Galilee" is the place where we are expected to be. "Galilee" is in. "Samaria" is out. "Galilee" is safe and familiar. "Samaria" is unfamiliar and could be dangerous. To live between Galilee and Samaria means that one is walking between the two, in unexplored territory. And it is here that Jesus encounters ten lepers. If there is going to be an encounter with the possibility of ministry and healing and gift-giving then we as persons and as congregations have to spend some time traveling between Galilee and Samaria, between the familiar and the unfamiliar, between how things are and what things might be. If we are going to be open to the spirit of the living God then we have to step aside and consider the bush that burns but is not consumed or the invitation to get out of the boat and walk on the water or talk with lepers, perhaps even talk with the Taliban, and pray for our enemies and be prepared to find gratitude where we least expect it even among those we call "Samaritans", those beyond the pale. That is what Jesus is doing and Luke appears to believe that those who follow Jesus should perhaps do likewise. And the lepers stand at a distance. But then lepers always do, don't they, to see whether they are going to be welcomed in or chased away, to see if they can find acceptance or be rejected once more, to see if there is healing or alienation, forgiveness or condemnation, which begs the question, Where is the Holy Spirit in this story or in this place?

In his book **Testimony**, Tom Long tells of once being in a church group in which people were invited to talk about times when God was close and real. He tells of one young woman, a professional ballet dancer, who reminded the group that she was raised in that particular church. She described the sanctuary including the baptismal font and told the group that she had been baptized as an infant in that very font. She did not remember this of course but she told how her father was very proud of that moment and that when she was a little girl he would often tell her of the Sunday that she was baptized. He would describe the baptismal dress that she wore and tell her what hymns were sung and what the minister had said in his sermon and he would always end by clapping his hands together and exclaiming, "Oh, sweetheart, the Holy Spirit was in the church that day!" I hope that Summer and Marc will tell Callum the story of his baptism and how we all rejoiced in his presence.

She then said that when she was a child she would attend worship with her parents and wonder, "Where is the Holy Spirit in this church?" She would look at the brass organ pipes, at the rafters in the ceiling, at the stained glass windows and she would wonder, "Where is the Holy Spirit in this church?" Then she paused for a moment and everybody in the room leaned forward to hear what she would say next. "As many of you know," she said, "I lost both of my parents to cancer in the same week, a terrible week, last winter. During that awful week, on a dark Wednesday afternoon, I was driving home from visiting my parents in the hospital and I was passing by the church. I felt an intense need to pray and so I came into the church and sat in one of the back pews and began to pray. The church was dark and in the shadows I poured out my grief to God and cried from the bottom of my heart. A member of the church, and here she named her, was in the kitchen preparing a meal for a church meeting and she saw me praying and knowing what was happening in my life she took off her apron and came and sat beside me in the pew, held my hand and prayed with me. It was then, the young woman said, that I knew where the Holy Spirit was in this church. (p.128)

I read that passage and set Tom's book aside and thought of Wesley-Knox.

I thought of the District Visitors and their dedication to those members of this church who are unable to be with us for a variety of reasons. I thought of the ministry of Dr. Doug Ross who faithfully keeps in touch with so many of this congregation. I thought of the pastoral care that happens in a hundred different ways week in week out, during coffee hour on Sundays in Centennial Parlour, in UCW groups and choirs, youth groups and Sunday school, in the pews on a Sunday morning, through meals prepared and served, groceries donated to the London Food Bank every week, and fund raisers for South Sudan, by hospital bedsides and with those who are frail and elderly, through people who call to say, "Don't tell them I told you but so and so is hurting and could use a call." And, of course, there are the thousands unknown to us, many of whom live between Galilee and Samaria, who are helped week in and week out by our weekly Mission and Service givings.

So I know where the Holy Spirit is in this church and it is a wonder to behold. I've watched the Holy Spirit gather us in under her wings as a mother hen gathers in her chicks and it is a marvelous to watch the Spirit at work. I've stood in the parking lot of an evening after a Board or Committee meeting and listened to the angels' songs that emanate from this holy place and they have sent this city shepherd home a-singing, knowing that his "sheep" are taking care of God's business. I have slipped into this sanctuary after a Sunday morning service and sat in the silence and thought of all the people who were in church that particular morning, all the stories and the struggles, all the caring and the sharing, all the hurting and the healing. This place, you see sits between Galilee and Samaria, a safe place for some, a very unfamiliar place for others.

Years ago I was called to the bedside of Ella Lee. She was dying. Her daughter called and said her mom wanted to see me. When I got there Ella's husband and all her children and grandchildren were there, squeezed in to the tiny bedroom of her tiny house. Ella was slipping fast but was still alert. She shared with the family some of the wishes that she had shared with me on previous visits. Then I sat on one side of the bed with her husband on the other and Ella in between with the family gathered close around. I prayed with them. Before I finished that prayer Ella Lee had slipped away to join the generations that run under us. We sat in silence for several minutes then hugged each other and left to make Ella's wishes come true.

Ella Lee was the daughter of Chinese immigrants to this great country. Her father's laundry business, above which they lived, used to sit where Toronto's present City Hall now sits. Her mom died when Ella was about twelve and the woman who filled some of the void in her life was a United Church deaconess by the name of May Houston. Ella never forgot May's kindness and part of Ella's legacy was to set up a bursary, not in her own name, but in the name of May Houston. Each year for 10 years one of her daughters and I would send out bursaries to nurses working in the United Church's Hospitals and Mission Stations across Canada. The recipients in those isolated outposts were nominated for such a bursary by their respective Directors of Nursing. The recipients were nurses in need of funds to keep themselves current in their profession. It was Ella Lee's way of saying thanks and it was one of the most gratifying and satisfying tasks in ministry in which I have ever participated. Years after Ella had died I met one of her sons on the subway platform in Toronto. He was a member of Canada's Armed Forces, a tall, strapping young soldier. After we had exchanged pleasantries he said through tear filled eyes, "I'm not much of a churchgoer, Dr. McKane, but I'll never forget how you gathered us around my mom when she was dying and helped us say goodbye. I could actually feel God's presence. I'll never forget that."

We all have experiences like that, moments when the presence of God is alive for us. It may be the baptism of a child. It may be the death of a parent. It may be a starlit evening at the cottage. It may be an encounter on a busy subway platform. And if we think about it, we all, like Ella Lee, have people for whom we need to give thanks. Who are the May Houstons in our lives? That is what this place attempts to do week in week out, remind us of God's presence and of God's grace. That is what this place has done for eight thousand and two hundred and sixty eight weeks. 8268 weeks! That's 159 years. With God's grace and your continued support that's what we'll continue doing for a week or two more.

Amen! And to God be the glory.

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