

The Surprising Samaritan

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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October 12, 2025

Luke 17:11-19

11 On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. 12 As he entered a village, ten lepers[e] approached him. Keeping their distance, 13 they called out, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!' 14 When he saw them, he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean. 15 Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. 16 He prostrated himself at Jesus'[f] feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. 17 Then Jesus asked, 'Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? 18 Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' 19 Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'

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Twenty five years ago, I was driving on a busy, four lane road in the middle of rush hour, when a long piece of metal fell off the vehicle directly in front of me onto the road. (This story, by the way, ends well.) I had about half a second to decide what to do: move into the lane next to me, certainly crashing into another car... brake hard, certainly causing the car behind me to crash into me... or drive over the piece of metal and see what happened. I drove over the piece of metal. And it caught in my undercarriage. Sparks started flying as it dragged along the pavement. The sound was awful. Fortunately, just ahead, there was a gap in traffic on my right and I managed to get over to the breakdown lane and I pulled over, broken down.

Flashers on, I caught my breath. I stepped out of the car and stood safely on the far edge of the shoulder. This was before I had a cell phone (we call this era BC), so I had no way to phone for help. I was going to need someone to notice. To see me. To stop.

No one stopped.

It felt like hours, though it was probably only two minutes.

And then people stopped. A van, with several strong looking folks, pulled up behind me. It was clear immediately that we did not know each others' language. But they pointed and I pointed and they talked to each other for a minute, and then they pointed again. In the universal language of hand-waving, they asked: Can we try to get the metal out from under your car? And I said yes! And these four guys got in front of and beside my car and they bent down and they pulled out this hunk of metal. They moved it to a safe edge of the shoulder, and then they smiled at me, waved, hopped back in their van, and drove away. And I made it safely to a mechanic who declared my car safe, and that was that.

I think I've told you this story in a previous sermon. It's one of those milestone experiences in my life. It could be the illustration for any sermon, really. I've told the story often when the text is the parable of the Good Samaritan. Folks *saw me* in my hour of need, literally broken down on the side of the road, and they stopped to help.

I didn't get a chance to thank them. I tell the story, over and over, of their surprising act of kindness, to thank them. To thank God for them.

So Jesus heals ten men. One of them comes back to Jesus to give glory to God. Jesus seems to value the tenth man's gratitude. When we can feel the blessing of God, when we can feel the mercy of a stranger, when we can testify to a healing (even of our car) - gratitude is the right attitude. Give glory to God. Thank you Lord.

I'm telling that story today for another reason.

Did you catch the end of the passage?

17 Then Jesus asked, 'Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? 18 Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' 19 Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'

The Gospels are all about reversals and unexpected situations. Jesus eats with folks he's not supposed to; cares for the marginalized, heals lepers and bleeding women. Jesus cares for the least and the lost, and tells us what we do to the least of these, we do to him. And the healing at the beginning of this passage is one such healing. Of lepers, who have to live in poverty, apart from society due to disease. Jesus has a preferential option for the poor and marginalized. Jesus sees them.

This beloved child of God, a Samaritan with a skin disease, was not just healed and cleansed. He was included and granted dignity.

But this isn't just about the way *Jesus* acts. The passage concludes with *one of those folks* - someone doubly marginalized from Jesus' community - a man with a skin disease who is also a Samaritan, a foreigner, being lifted up by Jesus as a model of faithfulness. This foreigner, the Greek says *allogenes*¹, this stranger, one of different genes, not in the family, is a model of faith. Jesus holds him up as a model of faith. And he's a surprising model, isn't he?

Holding the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other,² I was so struck, living in 2025 in the US, by Jesus lifting up a foreigner and a stranger as a model of faith. We live in a time of fierce anti-immigrant

¹ <https://biblehub.com/greek/241.htm>

² To paraphrase theologian Karl Barth

rhetoric. And Jesus in his rhetoric as well as his actions, teaches us that the immigrant, the visitor, the stranger, the one considered to be other — this beloved child of God — is worthy of dignity and respect, worthy of healing and welcome. And in this story Jesus takes it a step further. Not only should Jesus' followers practice compassion toward the foreigner, Jesus' followers have something to learn from the foreigner. The tenth leper, the Samaritan, the foreigner, is in this text Jesus' model of faithfulness. A surprising model, but if we're paying attention to Jesus, this model shouldn't surprise us at all.

I have been going, many Wednesdays, to stand next to the Burlington Mall, solidarity with immigrants and Bearing Witness at the ICE detention facility. One recent week there were 700 of us. I counted recently, and 7 Pilgrims have been in that number, and more of you have asked me about *Bearing Witness*.

For me, as the weeks go along, this is not just about showing up to support the most vulnerable of our neighbors. It's also to learn from these neighbors. We've heard stories from folks who have come, as strangers, as foreigners.

You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Deuteronomy 10:19

So often our immigrant neighbors' stories are stories of gratitude alongside stories of fear. Gratitude for homes, safety, meaningful work, friends, neighbors. They are courageous. To show up for a scheduled appointment with ICE right now is courageous. They are models of courage, hope, gratitude, generosity, hard work.

When I've gone on Wednesdays, I've felt a little righteous. Like the Biblical figure who says,

"I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy, and I championed the cause of the stranger."

Job 29:15-17

I get all caught up in my own trying to be righteous that I can miss the models, the surprising models. The things I can learn.

I wonder if Jesus' benediction was more of a commission. Maybe this man took the healing and restoration Jesus gave and extended it. Perhaps this man became

one whose life was grounded in gratitude,

one whose path was joyful and extravagant,

one who saw the beauty and dignity of God's beautiful and beloved children from every region and nationality,

because his own beauty and dignity had been recognized.

One who crossed borders to welcome and heal,

grateful he had been invited and restored.

Perceiving the amazing new thing that had been done in him,

I imagine his gratitude spilled over to everyone he met.

This is our call and commission, too.

For those of us who can see the blessings of our lives,

who have been welcomed,

who have things to be grateful for.

For those of us who witness courage and gratitude all around us.

And we can see the surprising models around us,

and not be surprised, actually.

We can choose

a life grounded in gratitude,

a path joyful and extravagant.

We have the chance to see the beauty and dignity of God's beautiful and beloved children from every region and nationality.

Hebrews says, "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

Hebrews 13:1-3

Let mutual love continue. Show hospitality, take care of the neighbor and the stranger - but also let *mutual* love continue. There's a place to learn, as well as to serve.

Amen.