

October 13, 2019 | Sanctuary worship service

TEXT: [Luke 17:11–19](#)

TITLE: **Good News from Unexpected Places**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

I want to begin by quoting the great theologian Harpo Marx. You remember Harpo—the silly Marx brother who played the harp but never said anything in the movies. His autobiography is ironically called, Harpo Speaks and in it, he offered this advice: *If things get too much for you and you feel the whole world's against you, go stand on your head... [Because] if it's a question of whether to do what's fun or what is supposed to be good for you, and nobody is hurt by whichever you choose, always do what's fun.*¹ So a mute comedian writes a book called “Harpo Speaks” and his advice is to go stand on your head, to choose what's fun. Probably not what you expected to hear when you came to church this morning!

Some of the wisest things you will ever learn will come to you from unexpected places: a chance conversation with a stranger; a book recommendation made in a passing comment by a friend, a question from a child that causes you to reevaluate your life priorities. Much of this life has been designed by God so that you will encounter wisdom in unexpected places. That's the message embedded in the little story we just heard about Jesus' encounter with a group of lepers.

Here are a few details you need to know about this story, but there's an even more important detail I'll get to in a moment. As you know, leprosy is a skin-disease, one that today is curable with antibiotics. Lepers were considered unclean—unable to enter the temple or take part in the religious life of the community; if someone came into contact with them, they too were considered unclean. So lepers existed on the margins of life and had the humiliating task of warning others to stay away from them. In this group of ten lepers was a Samaritan—a person from the kingdom that broke away from King David long before and an ethnic group considered by the Jews to be entirely unclean and barred from the temple. So this leper Samaritan was a double outcast.

Now here's the detail I want you to note. The story opened by mentioning that Jesus was traveling through the border region between Samaria and Galilee. It was a place to hurry through. It was not a place where you expected something good to happen. Think about the borderlands in our world today. These are the places likely on the margins of your experiences, although I'd wager some of you live in places that are marginal and outside the mainstream of life. Margins can take many forms. They can be geographic: the parts of town you never visit or consciously avoid. They can be economic: the divide between rich and not-so-rich, between those familiar with financial advisors and those familiar with payday loans. They can be personal: spouses and parents vs. those who are single, who don't have kids—or medical: separating those who are healthy from those with chronic illnesses. Border spaces can be linked to one's sexual identity and expression, one's citizenship status, your age (given that we live in a youth-fixated culture), or your race (given that we exist in an American society built around white privilege).

Life often takes us into border regions. The question is this: Will we put up our protective shields and try to pass through borderlands as quickly as possible, or can we look for signs of God's grace and real wisdom in these unexpected places? Albert Einstein once said that "theory determines the observation."² By that he meant that too often it is what we think to be true that shapes what we see and observe. If we think the borderlands are filled with people we should avoid, then we'll only see threats and strangers in those places. But if, like Jesus, we see something more than just a group of lepers calling out for alms from the side of the road—if our theory, our prejudice, our bias of privilege is able to be set aside for a moment, we can learn something we didn't anticipate learning. We are then open to good news from unexpected places.

In Luke's story, all ten lepers are healed but only one takes the time to return to Jesus and offer thanks. Scripture says he prostrated himself before Jesus—recognizing how the power and grace of God were at work in Christ—and then he thanked him. Faith and gratitude are intimately linked. But in re-telling this miracle story, Luke emphasizes that this particular example of faith came not from the pious in the mainstream, but from an outcast on the margins—a Samaritan, no less. Just like the earlier parable of the Good Samaritan, who alone showed mercy to a wounded stranger, this good Leper-Samaritan alone showed gratitude to the Savior who had intentionally walked in the borderlands.

There are two conclusions I want you to consider at this point – an easy one and an uncomfortable one. Let's do the easy one first. One of the simplest ways you can emulate the man who came back to give thanks to Christ is by what you're doing today—by joining together in worship; especially on a Sunday designated as Full Inclusion Sunday. Martin Luther once said "Worship is the tenth leper coming back." Worship is a time when our focus is on giving praise to the God who made us, redeemed us, and steadfastly loves us. The doxology we sing every week after the offering begins this way: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." And as part of our weekly prayers, we include the phrase "*Es justo dar gracias y alabanzas a Dios. It is right to give God thanks and praise.*"

And what is this setting in which we give God our thanks and praise? Well, it is a church in which you or I didn't get to pre-select who else might be in the pews. It is a place where differences of opinion sit next to one another, and sometimes rub up against one another. Where there is friction, both sides need to decide whether it should be fanned into a fire or whether it is a chance to show mutual forbearance. This is also a place where we regularly serve communion and walk forward to be fed at Christ's table—where the borders and boundaries and margins that might keep us apart during the rest of the week are overcome in one grand procession to a common meal.

C.S. Lewis said: "Praise is inner health made audible." A faithful, healthy spirit is one that says "thank you"—that shows gratitude to God and to one another. Worship is one place for this. But there is a harder place where this same lesson needs to be put into practice.

Luke told the story of the grateful leper to shock his readers because it forced them to recognize how good things happen in unexpected places. We're used to getting good news from surprising places. We celebrate the bravery of the young environmental activist Greta Thunberg finding ways to spread her message far from her distant hometown of Stockholm, Sweden. We currently find our attention drawn to the lands of Ethiopia and Eritrea thanks to the Nobel Peace Prize being awarded to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. But how comfortable are we when good news comes to us from marginal, unexpected, even unpopular places?

Nicholas Kristof noted that since 2002 over 17 million lives have been saved by a global AIDS program founded by former President George W. Bush. Is there moral space to celebrate that achievement from a leader much maligned by the progressive left? I read an article last week about the hundreds of migrant workers, most without proper visas or work permits, who intentionally rush to places devastated by hurricanes and work to repair homes, remove debris, and rebuild communities—often while living in terrible rental houses and constantly at risk of being exploited by unscrupulous contractors. In some ways I am grateful to our president for his terrible immigration policies, because only in grappling with the injustice and inhumanity of his anti-immigrant xenophobia have I learned so much about these migrant families living in our nation and, too often, here on the margins of Pittsburgh itself.³ Similarly, I'll be interested to know how the Supreme Court rules on the recent LGBTQ discrimination case—whether gay, lesbian, transgender individuals can be fired simply due to their sexual identity; and I'll be praying for surprising good news from helpful precedents set by conservative icon Antonin Scalia or a possible swing vote against discrimination from someone like Justice Neil Gorsuch.

When the ancient people of Israel were taken into exile, the prophet Jeremiah gave them the surprising advice of building homes in their oppressors' land and to pray for the welfare of their new cities. His faith in God led him to affirm that no place is outside God's control and good news can emerge from even the most unexpected places. Jesus walked in the borderland between communities long separated by fear and prejudice and found one wounded soul who embodied vibrant faith and inspiring gratitude – a Samaritan who deserved to be remembered for all ages. To be grateful and to be faithful means we humbly look for signs of God's grace in unexpected places. Margins are places we've created; they're not God-created. Too many of our expectations are shaped by our theories and limitations, not by God's. Start by giving thanks to God wherever you may be and whomever may be beside you. By grace it will lead to something unexpected—and that's definitely good news!

AMEN

¹ Harpo Marx, *Harpo Speaks*, p. 434.

² Michael Frayn, *The Human Touch*, p. 94.

³ "An Influx of Immigrants, Putting Florida Back Together", Miriam Jordan, NY Times, October 6, 2019.