

A Spacious Place
Jeremiah 29.1-7, Psalm 66.1-12, Luke 17.11-19
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Pentecost + 21C
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It is in our natures to create community. We are shaped for life together, and we are drawn to each other. One pair clusters together to make a home, then the homes cluster together to make a village, and the villages cluster together to make a town. The image of God in us calls us to this good, co-creating work of gathering and life sharing, and it is a work that is expansive—drawing us out from my solitary life into our shared life together. But you and I know that we have shadow sides, too. And just as soon as the village is complete or the town's borders have been defined, it seems we forget that the *imago dei* is in us and in the gathering and in the creating and naming of community. And we begin to think that God is the gathered thing or the created thing. And once the community has been named divine and the borders have been called sacred, then our shadow selves tell us we now have something to fiercely protect.

Of course, this thinking doesn't stop with naming and guarding community and borders that initially gathered to reflect the best of God's dreams and the creativity of God's nature. We humans also attribute a scarcity to God's ways. There's not enough love to go around, we fear. Not enough goodness. Not enough delight. And so, our shadow thinking continues, if God placed God's image in us and called us to community together, and if we have gathered these communities together and made a people out of ourselves, and if God calls all of that good, then surely God's blessing only rests here. Because we falsely believe that God's blessing can't rest *there* if it is already *here*. We start to look at those *other* communities and *other* tribes and *other* people as, well, OTHER. If they aren't us, then they can't have the same blessing. If they aren't us, then they can't have the same assurance of God's love.

What started as a very good thing—humans made in the image of God, drawn to one another because they see the light in each other, gathering and growing and creating as a people—now becomes a fragile thing to protect because we humans rarely believe that God is really big enough to be at work in ways we don't understand and places we don't understand. We can't imagine that God's love is high and deep and wide, even if the holy scriptures we hold so closely promise it is so.

Of course, I'm thinking of how divided we are in our world today. We here in this country have so little knowledge of all of the THEMES out there in other countries. There are the great wars and great needs of the global community that wake us up to our shared humanity—the stories from Syria, Turkey, and now another tragedy in Haiti. We see the light in each other, we recognize it, we catch a glimpse in a photograph or a news story. Then the questions come of what can we do and what are the needs. And it turns out one of the great responses is welcoming the other here to our home. After sending money and gathering items and praying prayers, one of the much-needed responses is to welcome the stranger, the orphan, the widow, the foreigner into our land.

And we begin to look at those borders we have called sacred and those towns we have named divine, and we become afraid again. This as a human response of our shadow selves, and I fear it is in full panic mode right now. We have made *others* not just out of the global community but out of people across town and in the next village over. This presidential election is flinging our worst shadows out—the shadows of scarcity, fear of others, protection of tribes are cast so boldly that it is nearly impossible for us to catch glimpses of light in each other. We expend such considerable energy on protecting the metaphorical borders around our tribes of likeness and safety that we cease to see how fluidly God moves from us to them and back to us again. We fail to understand the expansiveness of God's love.

This is not new. This was an ancient reality, too. This is the tension of being human—swelling into the fullness of who God created to be, and shrinking back in degrees of fear because we want to protect what we see and know and hear. Trusting God is good and love and comfort and near, and fiercely guarding that God because we fear there cannot be enough goodness and love and comfort and closeness to share.

The prophet Jeremiah is speaking into that fear when the worst really has happened and the borders, literal and metaphorical, really have been violated. Foreign neighbors didn't need care and support in a time of crisis. Instead, foreign neighbors were more powerful and destroyed the world Israel had known. Home and temple were destroyed, families sent out from their own tribes and villages into new ones. And pages and pages of scripture are devoted to exploring this reality. If borders have been named sacred and communities have been called divine, then what happens when they are shattered? What happens when the people have no sense of place anymore? Where is God in that?

Jeremiah speaks into an exiled place and calls the *imago dei* back into the imaginations of an exiled people. Create again. Gather again. Do it all again. Plant

gardens, have weddings, make families. The creative capacity of God is without end. The source is bottomless. The love and affection of God doesn't stop at borders, doesn't live in a temple, and cannot be destroyed by any human power that seeks to annihilate it. Jeremiah invites an exiled people to seek the divine light in each other again and to seek God's very best in the place where they find themselves. In doing so, they will discover God's blessing is bigger than they once thought.

The psalmist sings the story. God creates and preserves, God is good and powerful. But God's people ended up enslaved, and the psalmist says surely God let it all happen as the burdens were laid on their backs. And yet, he continues, you have brought us out to a spacious place. We were captured, we were oppressed, we lost our home, we lost our village, we lost our place, and surely you let it all happen. And yet, you have brought us out to a spacious place. God rescues and delivers and draws God's people away from the shadows of oppression and slavery into abundance. It is God's nature to move this way—drawing out, restoring, inviting, creating again and again.

Jesus then steps into this way of being when we find him in Luke 17 on his way to Jerusalem, through the region between Samaria and Galilee. He is in a border place—not *their* home or *our* home—he is in between. And as he approaches the next village, ten men with leprosy approach him but keep their distance. As men with leprosy, they have been forced to form their own community because they have been shunned from whatever home community they once knew. We can't know exactly what physical ailment these men suffered, but something was going on that deemed them a threat to the tribe, a threat to the way of living, a threat to the wellbeing of the borders made sacred and community named divine.

And so in this border place with these exiled people, Jesus immediately heals the men who Luke is clear in the Greek to name not as lepers but as men with leprosy. Even if the culture around them won't call them by name, Luke sees them as human beings first with leprosy as an addendum to that humanity. Jesus is quick to heal these ten men and instructs them to follow the law's requirement of showing themselves to the priests. According to Leviticus 13, the men were to continually declare themselves unclean and "dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp." The men are taking a great risk in approaching Jesus, and he is utterly unconcerned with any reality of contagious uncleanness while ultimately concerned that they be restored to fullness of community.

We expect this sort of thing with Jesus and aren't particularly impressed in its reading. Then the story takes a turn. Jesus treats them as already healed, and they respond to

his instructing to show themselves to the priests.¹ "As the men went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan."

A border place with exiled people, and the most *other* one can be, a Samaritan, comes back to Jesus when he sees that something amazing has happened. Fred Craddock writes of Jesus' interaction with lepers in Luke's gospel, "[The leper's] problem is not only one that evokes compassion, such as blindness of a withered limb; his disease is social, evoking repulsion. Yet the leper soon learns that joined to Jesus' power is his selfless caring...Jesus enters into the man's isolation and shame...Jesus gives himself to those to whom he ministers. Just as one cannot forgive without appearing to condone the very sin forgiven, neither can one help a leper without entering the colony."²

What takes place with this outcast, socially repulsive, utterly other man in a border place doesn't just heal him but saves him. The exchange isn't simply about skin and disease, but the lights come on and he becomes fully awake and fully alive in the very best of what God dreams for us. And he isn't the guy in the story that the audience expects to receive such enlightenment. He is made clean but also made well, made whole. The second blessing the man receives is as much about awareness as it is about the initial healing. He now has an awareness that prompts a certain way of living that puts a particular value on life and community and names the expansiveness of God's love and affection.

Now he knows that God is not limited to the spaces we have designated as God's territory. Now he knows that the borders we bless and communities we consecrate aren't exclusive property of God's presence. In fact, sometimes those places are so tainted with our efforts and shadows and competition and personal tribalism that God hasn't been at work in them in a long time. Instead, God is out in the place that is no place, the place of exile and abandonment, the place no one values. There, God is at work healing, blessing, restoring, inviting, creating a spacious abundance. And this is the work God calls us to when we profess to follow in the way of Christ Jesus. These are the ones Jesus shows us to see and to touch and to love.

Have mercy on us, Jesus, and call us back to Your Way today. Amen.

¹ see Fred Craddock's commentary on Luke 17, *Interpretation: Luke*

² Craddock, p. 71

