

# **“On the Way”**

**Luke 17:11-19**

**Part five of the sermon series,**

**“Revive Us Again: A Return to Jesus’ Original Program”**

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Joanna Samuelson, Interim Associate Minister, The First Congregational United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 23, October 9, 2022. I want to acknowledge all of those who work together to create this sacred space for worship each week: including the worship planning team; the accompanists, musicians and the choir; all the deacons; the office staff; the audio/visual team; and our facility maintenance team.

All the behind-the-scenes coordination and teamwork that takes place, week in and week out, here, at First Church, is truly a gift to our congregation!

Thank you, All!

## **“On the Way”**

Luke 17:11-19

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Let us pray: O Compassionate One, in this time of prayerful meditation, come to us, open us, touch us, move us, and stretch us through Your Word -- and through the words that you place on each of our hearts. And O dear God, may the words that I have to offer here, this morning, please you and honor you and glorify Your holy name. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

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On the way.

On. The. Way.

Our Gospel reading for this morning begins with these three words: *on the way*.

Now, our reading from Luke today is probably a familiar story for many of you. We return to it every three years in our lectionary cycle of readings.

*I* remember first learning about this story – about the ten lepers – in Sunday school and Vacation Bible School as a child. And then, as an adult, in worship and in Bible study.

I've preached on this text before. *And* there certainly are a number of different themes that emerge from this story.

For one, this story is known, of course, as a healing story – in which Jesus heals ten people who were stricken with leprosy.

It's also a story that is known for its emphasis on *radical inclusion*.

Not only does Jesus show compassion and care for those who are social outcasts because of their medical status as having leprosy – but Jesus **ALSO** recognizes and lifts up **the only one** among the ten lepers who is additionally seen as “the other” – for he's not just a foreigner but he's also seen as one of those despised Samaritans.

And, of course, this familiar story, also teaches all of us what it means and what it looks like to express our faith through gratitude and praise as exemplified by the Samaritan leper.

However during the past couple of weeks as I have been reflecting on this well-known pericope, a different theme, a new theme, emerged for me this time – which was prompted by those opening three words ... “on the way.”

That phrase, “on the way,” not only provides essential context for this particular healing story – but it also speaks to a significant shift and movement in Luke’s account of Jesus’ earthly life and ministry.

Now, you may recall that the first three chapters of Luke provide us with the birth narrative of Jesus, and a glimpse into his early years, as well as his baptism and his time in the wilderness.

And then, throughout the **next** several chapters of Luke, we learn of Jesus’ preaching and teaching and healing and ministry in Galilee – **but** in Chapter 9:31, in the Transfiguration story, it includes the first reference to Jesus’ anticipated departure to Jerusalem – and then, in Chapter 9:53, we read that “Jesus’ face was set toward Jerusalem.”

And so, it is at that point, by the end of Chapter 9, that we begin to understand that Jesus is resolved to head toward Jerusalem in some final sense.

Now, some New Testament scholars refer to these next several chapters as **Luke’s travel narrative** – because now, in the ordering of events, the Gospel writer of Luke emphasizes again and again that Jesus is on a journey to Jerusalem ... to die and to rise again. So, for the next eight chapters (through chapter 18), the stories and events in Luke’s account take place under the *looming shadow* of the impending cross.

And so, ALL of that background brings us to *this* familiar story for today – here, in the middle of chapter 17 – where we encounter Jesus healing the lepers somewhere between Samaria and Galilee and, as the story tells us, “**on the way** to Jerusalem.”

Now ... as familiar as this story is, I’ve never heard this story in quite the way that I hear it today. And I wonder how YOU are hearing it now – in these times. Again, our text emphasizes that Jesus was *on the way*. *Why DO those words seem especially significant and relevant for us today?*

Well, among other themes, it is a story about a consequential **TRANSITION** in Jesus’ life and ministry – that gradual movement from WHAT WAS toward WHAT IS YET TO BE.

How many of you know something about life’s *consequential* transitions?

Well ... that would be ALL of us ... whether we realize it or not!

We *all* know something about the beginning – or the ending – of a significant relationship; or the joys and the challenges of starting a family ... or beginning a new job.

Maybe you’ve recently had the experience of moving into a new home – or a new community; or maybe you’re adjusting to being empty nesters, as they say.

Perhaps you have felt the full range of feelings at the end of a meaningful career; or you know all too well the fear or anxiety related to a new diagnosis; or the deep sorrow and longings that come with grieving the loss of a loved one.

Indeed, each and every one of us has a whole lot of personal experience in navigating countless transitions as we move through the different stages and seasons of our lives. And, here, at First Church – in recent times – we, too, have been moving through **significant** times of transition within our life together as a congregation.

This past summer – as you all well know – we had to say good-bye to two beloved staff members: Mr. Kevin Jones as our Minister of Music – and then, a month later, the Rev. Emily Corzine as our Associate Minister. These were two very difficult good-byes with many deep feelings!

And then, in response, just recently, last Sunday, three among us were commissioned as interim staff members: Mr. Jim Gallagher as our Interim Choral Director, Mr. Barry Moenter as our Interim Organist and myself as the Interim Associate Minister.

It is fair to say that we are a congregation that is moving through a time of significant changes and transition. And so -- as you may have noticed -- this theme of transitions is being explored in different ways and in different settings, here, at church.

During the past couple of months, First Church member, Dr. Scott Graham, has led a number of presentations to a number of different church groups on this topic based on the research by best-selling author William Bridges.

Ms. Jackie Dean, our Commissioned Minister for Spiritual Formation and Direction, facilitated a spiritual retreat just last month on the theme of “liminal space” – or those in-between times along our life journeys.

And our weekly Adult Faith Formation classes – will continue to engage this topic of transitions throughout the fall through various lenses and through the leadership of different church members and friends among us.

Just this morning, Jackie connected this theme of endings and new beginnings to a very difficult story from the Book of Judges!

Here, at First Church, we certainly **ARE** a people on a journey these days as we move through – or as a wise friend said to me recently – *as we feel our way through* -- these in-between times and these times of significant transition -- *together!*

And so, we are called to turn *toward* one another – as we turn *toward* Scripture, and as we turn *toward* Jesus -- in the midst of change – and in the mix of all the feelings of anxiety.

As we as move through these times of uncertainty – gain and again, we are reminded – that Jesus is present to us and with us every step along the way on this journey!

Our Gospel reading from Luke today teaches us that even on Jesus' journey – while he was **ON THE WAY** to Jerusalem – to what was then not known nor understand by his followers -- Jesus still *continued* to meet the people *exactly* where they were – and in **all** of their need ... and there, in the midst of all of that change *and* an unknown future, lives were touched, personal connections were made, community was formed, and healing happened ... indeed!

And so, how did that Samaritan leper respond?

As Mark reminded us just this morning in his Children's message, with gratitude and with praise!

I'd like to close this morning with some words of blessing ...

***"A Blessing for the Place Between"***

Rev. Jan Richardson (an ordained UMC minister, writer and artist)

*The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief*

When you come to the place between.

When you have left what you held most dear.

When you are traveling toward the life you know not.

When you arrive at the hardest ground.

May it become for you a place to rest.

May it become for you a place to dream.

May the pain that has pressed itself into you  
give way to vision,  
and to knowing.

May the morning make of it an altar,  
and a path.

a place to begin again.

Thanks be to God ... Amen!

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