

Incursions into the Neutral Zone
Luke 17:11-19
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Those of you who are of a certain generation may remember an episode of the original Star Trek series in which the Romulan Empire made an attempt to gauge its military strength by attacking Federation outposts in Federation space using its newly devised cloaking device, which shielded its ships from detection in the Romulan Neutral Zone. You will also remember that this Neutral Zone was an area of space between the United Federation of Planets and the Romulan Star Empire that measured approximately one light year and served as a “buffer” zone. Any incursion into the Romulan Neutral Zone was considered a hostile act. Some of you may be thinking that any incursion into Star Trek during the preaching of the Gospel is also a hostile act. But I figured I’d boldly go where no man has gone before and risk being thought of as a nerd. Such is the nature of Neutral Zones.

The Neutral Zone is, of course, not an invention of the 1960s when the creators of Star Trek looked forward a few hundred years, but rather a renaming of what for centuries has been called a “no-man’s land.” The four kilometer wide so-called Demilitarized Zone that separates the two Koreas is a neutral zone. There used to be such a zone on the eastern side of the Berlin wall. In World War One, the area between the trenches, as little as 10 and as many as 100 meters wide, was

no man's land. But such regions are not found only in the midst of wars between nations, whether hot or cold. In many communities, elements of geography or industry or culture serve as de facto, if not more strictly enforced buffer zones between the properties held by differing economic classes or ethnic groups. It is from this reality we get the term, "the other side of the tracks," in other words, someone who is from the other side of a cultural, as well as physical, divide. In almost every case, whether it be a declared and agreed upon piece of space or property, or a ravine, or a set of railroad tracks, neutral zones are rarely neutral, they are no man's lands for a reason: people shouldn't be there because it is dangerous to go there. No man's lands are generally filled with land mines, debris, barbed wire, insults, stereotypes, threats, policies, even the very bones of people who tried and failed to pass through, anything to make entering there not worth the risk.

A similar neutral zone existed between the lepers of Jesus' time, and everyone else. It wasn't just contact with these people who had contracted a skin disease that was avoided, but even the area around them. And it was likely by mutual agreement. It was a region filled with danger in physical, psychological, and social forms. You see, healthy people wanted to avoid any possibility of contracting leprosy, or of being associated with people so sinful they had contracted leprosy and the lepers probably wanted to avoid any number of things, maybe the remainder of the life they could not lead, perhaps the insults and

humiliation they would receive from others who were sure they must have sinned to have earned their malady, maybe even physical brutality by those fearful of the spread of the disease. And so there was a sort of ring of space around the leper camps which no one really dared to enter, either from the inside or from the outside, except maybe to leave supplies for the lepers. No one, it seems, except the tenth leper, and he was a foreigner.

In the story of the cleansing of the ten lepers, Luke gives us an important lesson about the importance of gratitude, and God knows we can never be reminded too often to not only be grateful but to actually express our gratitude. But if that's all we get from this story, then we are like the nine cured lepers who went happily on their way but who also missed out on being healed, truly healed, put back together in mind and spirit as well as body. You see, the tenth leper invites us to think about those spaces in our lives that serve as buffer zones, and that keep us from experiencing the life to which God is truly calling us, a life experienced more fully than we can imagine.

As Jesus is making his way inevitably to Jerusalem, he and the disciples enter near to a village, where, it says, "ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" They have come, I sounds to me, to the edge of that neutral zone. As the story is told, it seems to suggest that this is not what they normally did. More likely they stayed closer to whatever they called a home. Maybe you remember the famous scene in that old

movie Ben Hur, when Ben Hur goes into a leper colony to find his mother. They lived in caves on the edge of town, and rarely saw the light of day. But in this case, as with many others in the Gospels, they have either heard about Jesus' miracle working ways, or they perceive somehow that he will be able to help him, and so they advance as close as they fear to get, to make their plea. And lo and behold, it is answered. They are cured of their leprosy with a simple, "Go and show yourselves to the priests," which would be the next step into their reintegration into society and with their families. They would need to be inspected and receive a certificate from the temple priest so that people would believe they were no longer contagious, and so they could be eligible to worship and sacrifice in the temple. And it says that they went, as we would expect them to do, but one of them turned back to give thanks, praising God with a loud voice and prostrating himself at Jesus' feet. And then, after offering one of his classic rhetorical questions, "Were not ten made clean?," he announces to this tenth leper, the foreigner, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

We must remember that the other nine lepers didn't actually do anything wrong. They obediently did what they were told, perhaps fearful that if they didn't, they might lose the blessing they had just received. When you win the lottery, you don't question the color of your ticket. And no doubt they were excited to get on with the life they had long imagined they'd never recover. And it is not even that they weren't grateful. Jesus doesn't question their gratitude. What he questions

about their absence is the lack of praising God, from whom the miracles had come. It is entirely possible to participate all your life in church, to never miss a Sunday, to bring your best dish to the church potluck, to sing in the church choir, to know the Ten Commandments by heart, but to never truly praise God. It really does take a certain intentionality. It is not that the nine lepers took their cure for granted, but that despite being cured, they still thought and acted like lepers who used to be good observant Jews; they were too stuck in their patterns and routines to recognize the life right in front of their eyes. They were just like their ancestors; remember: it took only a day to get Israel out of Egypt, but forty years in the desert to get Egypt out of Israel.

And so those nine lepers missed out on meeting Jesus face to face, which by all accounts in the Gospels was like meeting God. Because it was meeting God. And so even though they did nothing wrong, they missed meeting God face to face because they believed more strongly in the power of neutral zones than in the power of God to heal and save. You see, the physical neutral zone around the leper colony was the least of their problems. The no man's land that really mattered for them was the one they had inherited from those same ancestors, a no man's land set up between them and God, an uncrossable space filled with danger and obstacles, a means of protection for both them and God, the incursion into which was considered a hostile act. You can look at the system that mediated the divine presence that existed in Old Testament times and see it as something like a no-

man's land; there was this safe zone that protected both the people of Israel from God, but also God from the people of Israel. It was thought to be quite impossible to look at God without perishing. Remember what happened when Moses first encountered God on Mount Horeb – he hid his face. And despite his closeness to God, the closest Moses ever got to seeing God was catching a glimpse of the divine rump, as God passed by while Moses hid in the cleft of the rock, after God reminded him that “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” And on the other side of the Old Testament neutral zone, God needed to be protected from the people, or so it was thought, because with the way sin and impurity were understood, as something more like a physical contagion than the breaking of a law, the sanctity of the no-man's land, areas like the tabernacle and the Holy of Holies “protected” God from human contamination. Even as those nine lepers headed for the temple, they weren't thinking about going in and shaking God's hand and saying thank you very much, so nice of you to do this for me. No, they respected the boundaries they had inherited, their ways of thinking about God's presence in the world and in their lives.

And so now we are getting closer to the truth about Jesus and this tenth leper's incursion into the neutral zone. Maybe because he was a foreigner, and ignorant about the rules, about the way things are supposed to be, he enters into that risky space. It seems that he threw caution to the wind, and risked being stopped by the disciples, or mocked for being a Samaritan, or chastised for not

going to the Temple as Jesus had told him to do. And what did he get? An encounter with the living God, and an additional blessing the others hadn't received. You see, the word translated here as "made well," as in "your faith has made you well," is a word with a very wide range of meanings, including not only to be free of a disease, but also to be saved from something, to be made whole as a human being. It signifies coming to know what God's shalom is all about, to experience peace in the deepest sense, the kind that persists even when times are tough. The lives of all ten lepers had been changed by the power of God, but the difference between the nine who went on their way and the one who returned was that for this last one, the next time he got sick, he didn't worry that if his leprosy returned that he would be cut off from God again. The blessing he received from Jesus is the kind that changes your whole life, not just your skin. It's the kind that lets you challenge the neutral zones that truly divide people, the kind that lets you cross over the tracks, and walk through mine fields, and risk the barbed wire, and every other obstacle to give praise to God for your freedom, and to help others do the same.

What made the tenth leper's incursion in the neutral zone possible? How could such a thing happen? Well, there are at least two reasons. The first goes back to the gratitude which is the surface lesson of the story. When this man chose to express his gratitude, it led him into a new and dangerous place. He followed his gratitude and found himself with even more to be grateful for. There's a lesson for

us there, both in giving thanks to God and also to other people. Following your gratitude will lead you to new places. Some of those places will be scary and risky, but they will be worth it when you get there. Your relationships will deepen. Your compassion will grow. You may even suffer for it, but you'll still have that shalom, that wholeness that will see you through. But most of all, expressing your gratitude will let you see God face to face. It might not be as dramatic as the tenth leper, but you'll know God's face when you see it in the eyes of the person whom you've passed into the neutral zone to meet and help or to share your gratitude.

The other reason that tenth leper left the safety of his side of the neutral zone is because God did so too. In Jesus Christ, God entered the neutral zone between heaven and hell, entered into the violence and shame of our lives, of our human history, and as if coming into the world as a baby weren't enough of an incursion into the neutral zone between Creator and created, he went the extra light year and transgressed the neutral zone of death that divides the realms of hope and fear. And entering in to those not-really-so-neutral zones, he showed us precisely that God is not neutral about violence and death, that the world is not a no-man's land, but a land for everyone, that there need be no buffer between God and the rest of creation, that we can see God face to face and not die, but live. And from within that neutral zone, Christ calls us to enter in and take those risks and experience that blessing, for it is in the neutral zone that we find the life abundant we were created

to have. May God give each of us the courage to take those first few steps into that unknown place, assured that we have a light to guide our way. Amen.