



Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 23
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Joe and Bob, two good ol' boys, got jobs as baggage handlers at the Atlanta Airport. One day they were told to take a couple of lost pieces of luggage into the baggage claim area of the international terminal and deliver them to the lost suitcase office. As they walked into the terminal a Spanish tourist came up and asked in Spanish if they knew where he should catch the bus to his hotel, but since Joe and Bob didn't speak Spanish they could only try ineffective hand motions to communicate. So the traveler switched to French, but still nothing. Finally in desperation the tourist asked in German, but still nothing. Frustrated he walked on down the sidewalk to try to find someone better educated.

Joe turned to Bob and said, "you know, I've often thought I should learn a second language" and Bob replied, "why? That feller knew three languages and it didn't do him a bit of good!"

Most of us have been on both sides of that sort of conversation at different times. We've probably all met the stranger among us – the visitor, the newcomer, or tourist – who didn't know quite where to go or how to navigate the new world in which they found themselves. Likewise, we've all probably had the experience of being the foreigner: the new kid in the school, the new guy in the office, or the visitor to a foreign country. It's uncomfortable and it's difficult and it ought to increase our empathy for those who struggle through such situations: the situation of being the outsider, the one who doesn't belong.

I bring this up this morning because both our Gospel reading and our Old Testament reading address the question of the outsider. And, in a more indirect way, so does our New Testament reading. Let's take each of them in turn.

The Gospel, at first glance, might be read as a story about gratitude and thankfulness. And that message is certainly there: only one of the ten lepers expresses gratitude for his healing. But a single sentence within the story points us to the deeper meaning that the story conveys. Luke says of that one, thankful leper: "And he was a Samaritan." I won't take you through all the details of who the Samaritans were in relationship to the

Jewish people but I will summarize the long history by drawing your attention to two points about the Samaritans. Firstly, they were religious foreigners to the Jews. They represented a different religion that had similar roots to Judaism but was viewed by Judaism as radically different. It was something like the difference between Christians and Muslims. Secondly, they were ethnically foreign to the Jews. It was something like the difference between a Somali immigrant and someone born here in the United States.

Many of the Jewish people of Jesus' time – especially the religious and political leaders – were deeply prejudiced against Samaritans. You need only think how a Somali Muslim might be viewed by some people in modern America to understand how some of the Jews viewed the Samaritans. And yet here we have yet another story of Jesus – because we have had others like this, such as the parable of the Good Samaritan – in which Jesus demonstrates that no one is a foreigner to God. No one is outside of God's love, mercy, and community. And for all who seek to worship God through his Son Jesus Christ it is absolutely necessary that we recognize that we are all included in God's life whether we be Samaritan, Muslim, Somali, or other.

And this where the Gospel connects to the Old Testament lesson. Because it is also the story of a foreigner being included in God's life and love. Like the story of a the thankful leper, the story of Naaman would have been difficult for ancient Jewish people to hear because in both cases God demonstrates that even though the Jews were God's chosen people that did not exclude the rest of humanity from God's love or God's plan to bring all his children home to him. In Naaman's case, instead of a Samaritan we have a Syrian. The way the ancient people of Israel viewed the Syrians was something like the way many Americans today view . . . the – well, Syrians, actually. Many Israelites of Elisha's time viewed the Syrians as scary terrorists, and in the case of this particular Syrian, Naaman, he is a potentially scary terrorist in need of health care. So he's a threatening foreigner coming to their country seeking help and healing.

And yet, God demonstrates to all who were watching that his love and his concern extend to everyone. Not just the chosen few who happen to be lucky enough to have been born in the right time and the right place to learn of God's love from their earliest days.

And that brings us to our New Testament text in 2 Timothy. We had an interesting conversation at our lectionary discovery group this week about a particular phrase that St. Paul uses in this passage. St. Paul says that everything he is suffering in terms of hardship and imprisonment he is enduring “for the sake of the elect.”

That phrase, “the elect” has a long history in Christianity. In many times and places, including even into the modern era, it is often assumed that “the elect” are the members of the Church.

But St. Paul doesn’t actually define who “the elect” are when he refers to them in this letter to Timothy. At the time that he was writing the Jewish people would have said that they were God’s elect, they were the special people that God had chosen, and that all others – Christian, Samaritans, and Syrians alike – were outsiders and foreigners. And yet, the story of Naaman, among many others in the Hebrew scriptures, and the stories of Jesus – such as the one we’ve read today – all pointed in a very different direction for defining who God’s chosen people are.

The great twentieth century theologian Karl Barth argued that the coming of Christ into the world changed the definition of who the elect are, that Christ expands the scope of who God includes in his life beyond one ethnic group. Barth’s argument is that when God chose to become human, as the man Jesus of Nazareth, all of humanity became chosen in God. Barth argued – and, obviously, I agree – that when St. Paul spoke of God’s chosen people he was talking about people, period. Whoever and wherever and whatever they may be.

And in that context, the story of Naaman the Syrian and the story of the thankful leper who returns to praise God were all foreshadowing. They were God’s way of foreshadowing the fact that through the incarnation he would break down all barriers of nationality, ethnicity, and even religion, to form one new humanity in Christ.

Some of you have read a book from the early twentieth century, called *Our Southern Highlanders*, by a man named Horace Kephart. Kephart was a professional librarian and researcher who lived for many years in Bryson City and wrote about the culture, history, and anthropology of the Anglo people in these mountains. Kephart tells an amusing story of talking to an old mountain one day and he asked him “what word do you use to refer to people from the next valley over from you?” and the man said “them’s what we call furriners.” So Kephart asked, “well what would you call someone from a foreign country like France or Japan?” And the old man said, “them’s the outlandish!”

The good news of Jesus Christ is that none of us are outlandish to God. None of us are the foreigner, the unwelcome, or the unwanted. We have all been received into God’s life through Christ and now that we know this truth about ourselves God calls us to receive everyone we encounter, friend or foe, loved or hated, good or

bad, as someone as beloved of God as we are; no longer a foreigner to us but one of our own, one of those whom God loves and to whom God will always and forever be faithful.

Amen.