

“The Ministry of Seeing”
Luke 17:11-19
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First Baptist Church, Raleigh
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My college roommate and I didn't perform a lot of John Prine songs in the various settings where we played and sang. In the storyteller realm, we performed more Harry Chapin music simply because the musical style fit us better. But I love Prine's writing. The first song of his I remember paying attention to was "Hello in There." A professor played it for a class on elder care. The lyrics go like this.

We had an apartment in the city
Me and Loretta liked living there
Well, it'd been years since the kids had grown
A life of their own, left us alone
John and Linda live in Omaha
And Joe is somewhere on the road
We lost Davy in the Korean war
And I still don't know what for, don't matter anymore

You know that old trees just grow stronger
And old rivers grow wilder every day
Old people just grow lonesome
Waiting for someone to say, "Hello in there, hello"

Me and Loretta, we don't talk much more
She sits and stares through the back door screen
And all the news just repeats itself
Like some forgotten dream that we've both seen
Someday I'll go and call up Rudy
We worked together at the factory
What could I say if he asks "What's new?"
"Nothing, what's with you? Nothing much to do"

You know that old trees just grow stronger
And old rivers grow wilder every day
Old people just grow lonesome
Waiting for someone to say, "Hello in there, hello"

So if you're walking down the street sometime
And spot some hollow ancient eyes
Please don't just pass 'em by and stare
As if you didn't care, say "Hello in there, hello"

Obviously, the song made an impression on me, even as a college student. I couldn't get it out of my head, along with the video of elderly people being ignored. It was a poignant calling to see people who are often not seen, specifically the elderly. And there is no question that we often just pass them by — on the street, in a care facility, at a restaurant.

But there are other people we fail to see, sometimes because they don't interest us, other times because we are afraid that if we see them, we may be pulled into a conversation with them, perhaps even moved to consider helping them — the homeless person asking for help, the refugee whose needs are endless, sometimes even a member of our class or group, our family or church. There are times when we pass 'em by and stare as if we don't care. There are people we just don't see.

Jesus sees everyone, especially the people others try not to see. And his seeing is not only a first step toward healing and wholeness; it is a ministry. We cannot extend compassion to someone we fail to notice. So, seeing is a first step in a larger process. But it is also an act of compassion in and of itself. For those who are ignored, whether a homeless person whose name we do not know or an older person who is precious to us, just being seen, really seen, is a gift. Our reading from Luke offers just one of many examples of how Jesus sees everyone.

The story begins with Luke saying that on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus is going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. It is an odd statement because there is no area between the two. The territories share a border. Some wonder if Luke's knowledge of the geography is

limited. Jesus and his followers have been wandering around for some time on the way to Jerusalem. Some may wonder if their knowledge of the geography is limited and they are lost. There is a route faithful Jews take to avoid Samaritan territory, but Jesus does not avoid Samaritans.

Whatever is going on here, Jesus is in a borderland, a place where two territories meet — a place of uncertainty, danger, and possibility. We might think of Israel and the West Bank today, Ukraine and Russia, the U.S. and Mexico. This is what Luke is telling us, and it is a message about more than geography.

Chicana writer and activist Gloria Anzaldua, whose context was the U.S./Mexico border, said that borders are more than a geographic boundary. They are “a psychic, social, and cultural terrain that we inhabit, and that inhabits all of us... (They) are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them... the borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary... the prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants (*Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 1987, p. 3).”

This describes the place where Jesus encounters ten lepers. This is in-between land, at the edge of alien soil, Samaritan territory. It is dangerous, risky, yet also pregnant with possibility. Even before the lepers show up, there is tension in the air. Samaritans might be lurking. But there is also anticipation. What might Jesus do?

We don't have to wait long to find out. The lepers appear, keeping their distance and crying out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” We don't know their national origin or faith tradition at this point. We only know they are people who have been isolated because of their illness, quarantined indefinitely, to use pandemic language.

They are crying out for help, calling Jesus by name, something that only happens in three stories of healing in Luke, and Master, a term only disciples use. Luke says that when Jesus *sees* them, he says, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they go, they are made clean. He offers physical, emotional, and social healing, salvation in the fullest sense, but it begins with him *seeing* them. He does not look away.

As the story continues, one of the ten lepers, *seeing* that he has been healed, turns back, shouting out praise to God and thanking Jesus.

Luke says he is a Samaritan. We don't know about the other nine. They may be faithful Israelites headed to see a priest for cleansing which will enable them to return to community life.

We only know that this man is an outsider, much like Naaman, the Aramean commander who is healed of leprosy in the reading from 2 Kings, and that he comes back to express gratitude. Jesus expresses frustration that he is the only one to offer thanks. Where are the other nine? Anyone who has ever been in ministry understands his frustration. But then, Jesus calms down and offers the man a further blessing.

It is a story of healing not just sick people but outcasts, one of them a multiple offender — both a leper and a Samaritan! But the healing begins with seeing, and that Jesus is willing to see and thus value these people speaks volumes about how inclusive his vision is.

One message for us here, as followers of Jesus, is a calling to see the people who most desperately need to be seen. I think of the homebound members of this church, those on the formal list and many others who are homebound, beloved elders who have given much to this church. We have wonderful homebound visitors, but we always need more. We dare not turn away even from those who are difficult to see in their current state of physical and/or mental decline.

I think also of the quiet people in our inner circles who can be overlooked — newcomers and longtime friends, fellow church members who just don't speak up like some. They can easily disappear from our sight. They need to be seen and heard, valued like everyone else. It takes intentionality to make sure every voice is included.

I think of people in need, like those we serve through our clothing ministry and food truck, Family Promise and Toy Joy. When they are coming to us for a specific purpose, we see them and help them. But when we encounter them in the natural rhythm of life, we often look away, for reasons that make sense, we can't respond to every need. But sometimes just seeing someone and saying hello helps. It is painful to have people walk by and refuse to acknowledge your existence.

But I also think of people who are considered taboo for various reasons. In another setting, a woman from another church scheduled a

meeting with me, not to change her membership, though she was unhappy. She came in search of healing, wanting to be seen as being of value. Her son was on death row for a crime he insisted he did not commit. She was not sure whether he was guilty or innocent, but her pastor's response was to say from the pulpit that her son deserved to die and would go to hell, nothing could change that. His life no longer had value, nor did his mother's. So, she received no compassion in her grief.

Clearly this pastor did not know that judgment belongs to God and that there is no limit to God's forgiveness. This is not to say that actions don't have consequences — I don't know if the young man was guilty or innocent — but Moses killed a man, David was responsible for the death of Uriah, the Apostle Paul had Christians put to death before his conversion, and God used all of them. Jesus forgave the very people who put him to death as he was dying. We have no authority to write off any life, to decide that any person is unworthy of being seen and loved.

Our calling is to see everyone, really see them, but there is another message for us in this story. The God who was in Christ sees us too. Most of us have some period when we feel invisible, unheard, unvalued. There may be a few charmed souls who never question their worth, but most of us wonder sometime whether anyone would notice our absence.

The good news of the Jesus story is that the God who was in Christ sees us and values us and offers to make our lives full and whole. In a world where there are a billion trillion stars, and thus who knows how many planets and creatures of value, the Divine Being who created it all sees each of us and values us. If that doesn't move us to gratitude, we don't understand what it means. Mostly it means that we matter.

There is a boy in Flannery O'Connor's short story "The River" who comes from a dysfunctional home that not only makes him miserable but provokes him to wonder if his life matters. With a little help from a woman named Mrs. Connin, he ends up getting baptized in the river by a preacher who tells him when he comes up from the water that he counts. He didn't even count before, but now he does!

I would say he always counts, but in this moment, he comes to know that he counts. We all count in the eyes of God. We are all seen and loved, and then, in response, called to see and love others.