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Luke 17:11–19

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# FAITH ON THE EDGE

*SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*

On my 50th birthday two of my friends invited me to go on a surprise adventure. As we headed south on Highway 101, I had no idea where they were taking me. About an hour later we enjoyed a leisurely lunch and then headed east toward the foothills. As we approached a small airport, I thought to myself, “Knowing how much I love to fly, perhaps my friends have chartered a glider!” Sure enough we pulled into the airport and got dressed in our flight suits. Then they gave me a sign to hold up for my photo: “I’m 50 years old and I’m jumping out of a perfectly good airplane.” At that point it’s a little late to back out. So at 50 years old I jumped out of an airplane, and it was a thrill of a lifetime. But, given the risk, it was not something I would have chosen on my own. It took the faith of two friends to push me over the edge. My adventure into the life of faith has been similar.

Our text this morning opens with the phrase “On the way to Jerusalem,” and is the third reference of Jesus’ ultimate goal and destination (“set his face,” 9:51; and “journeying toward Jerusalem,” 13:22). This marks the beginning of the third and final leg of Luke’s travel narrative (17:11–19:27). During this segment you can feel the gravitational pull as the pace of the narrative accelerates and the number of geographical markers dramatically increase as Jerusalem comes into view (19:28). Joel Green observes that, “as the travel section begins to draw to a close, the reality of the journey and threads of its principal motifs are drawn together,”<sup>1</sup> and bring everyone’s expectations of the kingdom to the surface. What will happen in Jerusalem when Israel’s king arrives? Will this be the long awaited return of the Lord to Zion and the establishment of his kingdom over the whole earth that Zechariah and other prophets predicted?

**Thus says the Lord: “I will return to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts, the holy mountain... Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets... Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the Lord... In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.’” (Zech 8:3–5; 22–23 ESV)**

The answer is “yes,” and “no.” Jesus is coming to Jerusalem to fulfill his Messianic destiny, but it won’t be what Israel expected. Therefore Jesus must redefine his disciples’ expectations, for his coming to Jerusalem will not immediately usher in the eschaton. Jesus must first suffer and die. But, as Green explains,

Suffering is not the last word, since death gives way to resurrection (18:33), and resurrection is a prelude to Jesus’ return. Luke thus articulates an interlude between Jesus’ rejection and enthronement on the one hand, and his return in royal authority on the other. The interlude consists of “the days of the Son of Man” (17:26),

during which Jesus’ followers will be called to exercise faithfulness, so that when the Son of Man returns he will “find faith on earth” (18:8).<sup>2</sup>

Will the disciples learn to live by faith? Thus far in Luke, the results have not been very promising. As you may recall from our text last week, when Jesus ordered that they extend limitless mercy in forgiving one another, they gasped, “Increase our faith!” (17:5). In the parable that followed the disciples discovered that forgiveness was merely the ABC’s of faith, basic pre-school stuff, which was expected of all God’s servants, a discipline they would practice each and every day. Forgiving one another was to be as natural as breathing. Jesus had much bigger things in mind—impossible, audacious dreams of a global vision that he captured in a new metaphor.

**“If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed,  
you could say to this mulberry tree,  
‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’  
and it would obey you.” (Luke 17:6)**

This graphic and striking metaphor was designed to break open their myopic thinking and stir their imaginations with a global vision of **where** faith will take them and **what** faith will accomplish in their new calling as apostles. With the faith of a mere mustard seed they will command a massive mulberry tree to be uprooted and be planted in the sea. If you sit with that paradoxical image and reflect on it, you can’t help but wonder how can a tree root itself in the sea? It’s impossible. And yet Jesus insists the image is true, and we can’t just dismiss it as random hyperbole. Something new is afoot, and that tree will not only survive, it will **thrive** in an utterly hostile environment! Jesus registers his disappointment, “if you had just this much faith, and you don’t, it would have obeyed you.”

With time running out, Jesus makes this his number one agenda—to inculcate his disciples, and by implication us, with faith, a faith to see what most cannot see and the courage to throw ourselves headlong wherever the Spirit leads us. This kind of faith cannot be taught in a classroom; it has to be experienced to be believed. I would like you to put yourself in the shoes of a disciple following behind Jesus and imagine how your faith would be stretched. Our text will address four questions:

1. Where is faith **found**?
2. What does faith **see**?
3. What does faith **do**?
4. When we observe authentic faith, what **impact** does it have upon us?

## I. Finding Faith in a Liminal Zone

### A. A plea for divine mercy

**On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. And as he entered a village, he was met by ten**

lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” (Luke 17:11–13)

As we take up the journey, we discover that Jesus is leading us into a liminal space, traversing the dangerous border between Samaria and Galilee. A Jew, making his pilgrimage from Galilee to Jerusalem, would take one of two routes. The shortest and most direct route was through Samaria. This route however was not without its risks, for on one occasion several pilgrims lost their lives when a quarrel broke out between Jews and Samaritans near Samaria. Because of the danger many “Jewish travelers would take a second route and skirt Samaria by crossing the Jordan River near Scythopolis, passing through Perea, and then re-crossing the Jordan at Jericho.”<sup>3</sup> Now Jesus was never one to live or act cautiously, and he made it his custom to travel directly through Samaria. But on this his final pilgrimage, the Samaritans had refused to give him hospitality (9:52), forcing Jesus and his disciples to take the alternative route around Samaria.

It isn't long before you find yourself on the edge of enemy territory. Your nerves are tense and your guard is up for fear of hostility or defilement. To a Jew, a Samaritan was a religious heretic (they built a rival temple to Jerusalem and corrupted the sacred Scriptures with a version of their own), a social outcast (they had intermarried) and an implacable enemy. The enmity and distrust between them had a long and violent history since the 5th century B.C. And the fact that they slammed the door in Jesus' face at the outset of the journey has only confirmed your prejudice that things are not about to change, even with Jesus.

Now that Luke has got you locked into this suspense thriller, Jesus turns off the road and you follow him into a “certain village,” but you don't know whether this is a Jewish or Samaritan village. Luke doesn't tell us. If it is a Jewish village, you would feel like you just stepped out of a mine field into a safe house; you can breathe deeply and relax. But if it is a Samaritan village, you will be walking into a hornet's nest and will not be able to digest the terror. And your holy pilgrimage suddenly feels more like a suicide mission. Why does Luke suspend our emotions and make us live in this liminal zone of not knowing? The answer is that this is where faith is born.

Richard Rohr explains:

The word “liminal” comes from the Latin word *limens*, meaning literally, “a threshold.” A liminal space, the place of transition, waiting, and not knowing is...

...a unique spiritual position where human beings hate to be but where the biblical God is always leading them. It is when you have left the tried and true, but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are finally out of the way. It is when you are between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer. If you are not trained in how to hold anxiety, how to live with ambiguity, how to entrust and wait, you will run... anything to flee this terrible cloud of unknowing.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus enters the village, ten men appear out of the shadows. Your first thought is trouble, for in the ancient world ten men didn't make an approach unless there was some serious business to conduct, like killing your enemy (Jer 41:8). But as they come out into the light you realize that they are infected with leprosy, which only diminishes the risk factor from death to defilement. In both the Hebrew Scriptures and ancient Greek writings *lepros* was used to designate a wide range of diseases that erupted on the skin making it “rough, scabby or scaly.” While in most cases the disease was not life threatening, the

social implications were devastating. As Green observes, “Regarded as living under a curse and as ritually unclean (whether they were Jew or Samaritan, it does not matter), they were relegated to the margins of society.”<sup>5</sup>

The appearance of a leper doesn't surprise you, for Jesus healed a leper earlier in Luke (5:13) and in a message to John the Baptist (7:22), he affirmed that this was a common feature of his ministry. What is surprising is their number. There are ten of them, which has overtones of a representative quorum or a ruling body. Keeping their distance to protect you and the others from ritual impurity, they raise their voices like a choir of trumpets and cry out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” The term “master” (*epistatēs*) is a term used only by Luke, and in every other occurrence it is found on the lips of Jesus' disciples on occasions when they are astonished by Jesus' unrivaled authority and miraculous power:

**And they went and woke him, saying, “Master, Master, we are perishing!” And he awoke and rebuked the wind and the raging waves, and they ceased, and there was a calm. (Luke 8:24)**

Hearing this choir of lepers plead for mercy melts all the tension in the air. And yet in the calm that follows you are bombarded with a myriad of questions about these Jesus seekers. How did these marginalized outcasts come to know Jesus by name? Are they Jews or Samaritans? Who organized the ten to make a plea with one voice? And how did they acquire the faith to see that Jesus is the “master” of divine mercies?

This is faith on the edge. For the broken see in Jesus what insiders cannot see—that God is at work in Jesus inaugurating his kingdom, that *healing*, beneficial life resides in him. Therefore they have no hesitancy throwing caution to the wind and risk exposure and make themselves vulnerable to shame in order to receive mercy.

## B. Jesus' gift of mercy

**When he saw them [lit. “seeing them”] he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went they were cleansed. (17:14)**

Before a leper could return to society, they had to be examined by a temple priest, who functioned as a purity inspector. If after a careful examination the priest determined the disease was no longer present, he would give the patient a clean bill of health (pronouncing them “clean”) through a prescribed set of sacrifices (Lev 14:1–57), so that the person could be fully restored to the community.

In faithfulness to the Law of Moses, Jesus directs the ten, “Go show yourselves to the priests.” It is only as they depart in obedience to Jesus' command that the ten receive the divine gift of cleansing. Jesus' word alone was sufficient, and not for just one, but ten, a legal quorum for what is about to become a new society. The ten lepers prove the notion that once faith “sees” it must act, and with those first faithful steps life (eternal) happens.

Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back and always ineffectiveness—Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from that decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamed would have come his way.<sup>6</sup>

If God is indeed the one who calls into service, then I'm free to give up control of my life and jump off the cliff into the unknown. For he is responsible for my destiny and is preparing me for something bigger than I can imagine.

So what has happened to your faith during this process, as a disciple? The mountain of anxiety you were laboring under suddenly gives way to speechless wonder, as a choir of lepers is transformed into happy pilgrims, who give you high fives as they board your bus to Jerusalem. As you take your seat, Gamaliel Goldstein stands up at the back of the bus and begins to recite Zechariah's ancient words, "In those days ten men grasp the garment of a Jew, and say, "Let us go with you..." but wait a minute, there's one missing...It's Mordecai, he's going to miss the bus!" As you look out the window of the bus, you can't believe what you see.

## II. Faith that Sees Beyond the Healing

### A. The gift of sight and insight

**Then one of them, seeing that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. (17:15–16)**

As the nine make their way to the temple, another miracle occurs. The tenth "sees" that he is cleansed, and he "turned back, praising God" in jubilant uninhibited worship.

Unlike the others this one perceives that he has been the recipient of divine grace—and that at the hand of Jesus. Of his three actions—praising God, falling at Jesus' feet, and thanking Jesus—the first is expected within the Lukan narrative, the second two quite extraordinary.<sup>7</sup>

Praising God is fine, but why return to Jesus to do so, especially when Jesus gave explicit instructions to go to the temple and show himself to the priest for purification rituals? When is disobeying the rules true obedience? Luke makes it clear he "sees" that Jesus is the source of God's life, and that giving thanks at his feet, is indeed, giving thanks at God's true temple, for which the temple in Jerusalem was only a mere shadow. His unabashed worship and praise imitates the faith of David, who made it his life purpose to pay his vows to God at the temple in a sacrifice of praise whenever God answered his prayers. Thanksgiving reorients us and reestablishes our relationship to God in appropriate ways.

After suspending our emotions for almost the entire story, Luke plays the trump card: "Now he was a Samaritan."

### B. Are you like the nine or the one?

**Then Jesus answered, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" And he said to him, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well." (17:17–19)**

Jesus' tone is shocking. He is amazed that only one out of ten had the faith to be able to comprehend the reality behind the miracle. As you hear Jesus' disappointment in the unquestioning obedience of the nine, it makes you wonder when our obsession with keeping the rules prevents us from exercising faith? Faith on the edge is never safe.

While we are trying to come to grips with all this, Luke lands yet another surprise—all the other lepers were Jews except this "foreigner." This suggests that the village Jesus entered was indeed Jewish, and this lone Samaritan had the courage to cross the boundary into no man's land and identify with an all-Jewish fraternity. What

courage that must have taken when you consider the ridicule and abuse he was willing to endure. The term "foreigner" is only used here in the New Testament. But it has been found on inscriptions that forbid "foreigners" access to temple precincts that are exclusively reserved for Jews. The irony is palpable, when you think that this foreigner is one of the first to worship in the true temple, for which the other was a mere shadow.

Sadly the nine will remain Jews "in the flesh," but this foreigner has become a true son of Abraham, "raised up" to the life of the age to come through a faith he didn't know he had. Indeed he's experienced the full measure of what it means to be "saved." Equipped with the life of the age to come, he is sent off, not to Jerusalem, but *anywhere* ("your way" is not in the Greek text), the full implications of which we don't fully comprehend until the book of Acts. When the Spirit is "poured out" without measure, no longer do believers have to make pilgrimages to encounter God in a holy place, for God will permanently dwell within them.

Where does all this leave us?

## III. Faith on the Edge

### A. Where is faith found?

Faith is found where we take the risk to follow Jesus on the road less travelled into a liminal space of the dangerous and unknown. It is there we encounter the broken who help us discover what faith looks like.

### B. What does faith see?

The poor and broken see in Jesus what insiders cannot see, that God is at work in Jesus inaugurating his long-awaited kingdom in ways that are different than we expected—that healing and beneficial life reside in Jesus, that he is the true temple of God, and that God's blessing has nothing to do with nationality, race, sex or privilege.

### C. What does faith do?

1. It is vulnerable: it risks exposure and shame to ask for mercy
2. It is obedient: it does the one thing Jesus asks, *before* he answers our requests
3. It returns to its Lord to give public praise, with jubilant unabashed worship and in so doing, receives a greater miracle of "sight," the living Lord in their midst.

### D. What impact does faith have on the insiders?

Faith on the edge challenges "insiders" to examine whether we are in fact on the "inside" like the Samaritan leper, or on the outside like the nine. Is our faith defined by believing the right doctrine about Jesus and faithful attendance at church? Or does it make us attentive to the voice of our two friends (Jesus and the Spirit), inviting us each and every day to follow them into uncharted territory of the unknown, a liminal space where we have no control? The adventure promises to be the most thrilling of our life, and one that makes us feel most alive as we take part in uniting cultures of every race, sex, and nationality into a family. All it takes is the faith of a mustard seed to take that first step outside the airplane.

1. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 615.
2. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 616.
3. John D. Currid and David P. Barrett, *ESV Bible Atlas* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 232.
4. Richard Rohr, “What is a Liminal Space?” *Liminal Space Finding Life Between Chapters*, <http://inaliminalspace.com/about/what>
5. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 622.
6. W. H. Murray. (2014, March 29). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved, May 1, 2014, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=W.\\_H.\\_Murray&oldid=601761485](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=W._H._Murray&oldid=601761485)
7. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 624.

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