Twenty-Eighth Sunday of the Year, Cycle C

Broadway luminaries Roger’s and Hammerstein’s

 Included in *The King and I* the famous line

 “If you become a teacher, by your pupils you’ll be taught”

 That wisdom has been realized in my life frequently

 One student taught me about Krister Stendahl’s “holy envy”

 Another led me deep into the richness of appreciative inquiry

A third, in preparing a homily that needed to be

 Both accessible and theologically sound, wrote:

“Simplicity is complex. It's never simple to keep things simple.

 Simple solutions require the most advanced thinking.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

 That is true when politicians call for free college tuition

 Or health care for all

 Or bringing troops home from Northern Syria

Simplicity is complex

 Which is also true of today’s readings

 That could give the impression that the underlying message is

 Simply “be thankful”!

A favorite blogger jests that

 That this could be her mother’s favorite gospel

 Because it seems to be about cultivating good manners

She writes: *My mother was big on thank you notes. She said you could tell a lot about a person depending on whether or not they bothered to write them. She told of a friend who, whenever a bride did not have the good manners to write a thank-you note for a wedding gift, would write:*

*Dear Amanda:*

*Thank you for inviting us to your lovely wedding. I am writing to make sure that you received our gift. If you didn't, can you let me know and I'll arrange for a duplicate to be sent to you? Wishing you every happiness in your marriage, Jeannie & John Audacious*

Noting the passive aggressive nature of the note

 The author does not suggest some fawning or groveling response

 But instead offers this possible reply:

*Dear Jeannie and John, I did receive your gift, and many others that were even more lovely. I have decided not to write thank you notes since I am very busy and they are very time consuming. You may, if you wish, send me a duplicate gift. Hope your marriage lasts - Amanda[[2]](#footnote-2)*

The blogger concludes by suggesting that today’s readings

 Are not simply an instruction from Divine Miss Manners

 About being grateful – but point to more profound realities

One celebrated homiletician believes the essential move in preaching

 Is to find the discrepancies or the “oops” in the readings

 Doing so creates sufficient intrigue for unfolding

 What he calls the homiletical plot.[[3]](#footnote-3)

an usual number of discrepancies abound in today’s readings

starting with that opening readings from the Book of Kings

 which gives a snippet about Naaman’s conversion

 much is missing, including the first part of this chapter

 describing Naaman as a military officer of Israel’s enemy

 whom the God of Israel had given many victories

 So Israel’s enemy has the backing of Israel’s God

 Sure the story ends with the conversion of the outsider

 But it also ends with the punishment of the prophet’s servant

 So not just a gratitude tale

 But one of unexpected reversals through the stranger

Then, of course, there is that not so simple Gospel

 the mother of our edgy exegete

 could conclude that the story is about

 9 smug Jews and 1 grateful Samaritan

 Great way to shame the regulars

 Into being more grateful …

 Then, again, “simplicity is complex”

 A signal that there is more going on than ingratitude

 Is the geographic location for this Jesus encounter

 in the region between Samaria & Galilee

 Seems contradictory; like a region between Chicago & the burbs

 Which many of you prove doesn’t exist

by your Sunday commute here

 However the region between the U.S. & Mexico

 Or North and South Korea does seem to exist

 A kind of no-man’s-land

 Or political DMZ

In this gospel no-man’s-land complications abound

 Like there is pretty compelling evidence

 That these 10 did not have leprosy

 Both biblical scholars and medical scientists agree

 True leprosy almost certainly did not exist

in ancient Palestine[[4]](#footnote-4)

 True they had some kind of scaly skin disorder

 But it did not make them contagious, it made them unclean

 Biblical leprosy is not “catchy,” it is “dirty”[[5]](#footnote-5)

 Second, Samaritans and Jews hated each other

 but sharing the status of being unclean

 Erased the ethnic and racial divisions between these groups

They became a band of brothers

 Scavenging for food together, maybe caring for each other

 Certainly calling out in one voice to Jesus for pity

 But by healing them, Jesus in effect

reinstated their ethnic and religious rivalry

 They were now well enough to hate each other again

Problem no. 3

 Jesus sends the 10 off to show themselves to the priests

 so they can be declared clean and socially restored

 But the Samaritan could not go with the other 9

 For he was a heretic and an outlander

 He would have been stoned if he went near the temple

 Maybe he came back to Jesus and expressed his gratitude

 Because he could not do it in the Jerusalem temple

Problem no. 4 - The Samaritan was polite

 But we do not know if he was virtuous or even good

 Was he “saved” simply because he was courteous?

 Similarly we don’t know of the other 9 were unvirtuous

 they were doing exactly what Jesus told them to do

 Their gratitude was in their obedience, fulfilling the law

 Weren’t they saved as well?

 Maybe after their temple sojourn

 They did try to come back and offer thanks to Jesus

 But Jesus was notoriously peripatetic

 Who knows where he had wandered if they had returned

There are plenty of “oops” in these readings

 Yet, even more challenging is the “so what”

 the holy resolution to these problematic revelations

 so we return to the spiritual terrain between Samaria and Galilee

 To the itinerant no-man’s-land we call Jesus

 To the sacred DMZ we call Christ

 To not only Paul’s unchained, but also unbounded word

 Jesus of the gospels is consistently intolerant of hard boundaries

 Between the pious and the polluted

 Clean and unclean

 insiders and outsiders

 To paraphrase Hemmingway,

 Jesus is not only a moveable feast

 He is the divinely sanctioned moveable boundary

 A roving DMZ, who demilitarizes every person or group who dare enter his ambit

 He’d undoubtedly make a terrible diplomat

 For if asked about the proper boundary

 Between North Syria and Turkey

 Or between Kashmir and India

 Like Ayn Rand’s Atlas,[[6]](#footnote-6) I presume he would just shrug

 Asking not where to put the boundaries

 But why they are there in the first place

Few contemporary writes have spilled more ink

 Over the instinct to divide the world between us and them

 Than Robert Sapolsky, scientist and author of the bestseller

 *Behave: The Biology of Humans at our best and worst*

In a recent article entitled “Why your Brain Hates other People: and how to make it think differently, He writes:

Humans universally make Us/Them dichotomies along lines of race, ethnicity, gender, language group, religion, age, socioeconomic status, and so on… it’s not a pretty picture. We do so with remarkable speed and neurobiological efficiency; have complex … classifications of ways in which we denigrate Thems; do so with a versatility that ranges from the minutest of microaggression to bloodbaths of savagery; and regularly decide what is inferior about Them based on pure emotion, followed by primitive rationalizations that we mistake for rationality. Pretty depressing.[[7]](#footnote-7)

A professed atheist, Sapolsky does believe there is hope

 For him that hope rises when we individuate

 When we meet a “them,”

 Experience their uniqueness

 Honor their humanity

 Jesus was not only the king of kings and Lord of Lords

 But the original prince of individuation

 A roving boundary smasher

 The divine opponent of all “theming”

Journalist Leslie Guttman was visiting a bookstore one day

She writes: The bookstore was packed …. A woman with long, black hair about five feet away …was leafing through [a book]. I glanced up …in time to see her slip a book into her satchel and walk off. I hesitated and then walked after her. “Pssst,” I said, pointing at the satchel. Up close, I saw that she was about thirty … probably homeless. Her khaki parka was filthy, her hair matted. The satchel was bursting with her belongings. She gave me a sorrowful look … handed me the book and ran off.

The book was a journal designed for someone who was grieving. Someone like me… beautifully bound, the paper creamy and heavy. It had space to write the answers to statements like: … “It’s hard for me to be without you when I . . .”

“She’s been wanting that book,” said the manager who .., watched the whole thing. “She comes in all the time and looks at it. Sometimes, she puts it on hold, but then she never gets it.”

Dammit! … Why did I have to be such a Goody Twoshoes? Why didn’t I just let her steal it? I ran out of the store and caught up with her a block away. “Did you just lose someone?” I said.

“My grandmother,” she [replied]… “I miss her so much I can’t stand it.” I told her about my stepdad, who had just passed away. His kindness had knit our family together for eighteen years.

I … handed her the book, we both stood on the curb and wept.

For the first time since my stepdad died, I felt understood—as only a stranger can understand you, without inadequacy or regret. Up until then, I had felt alone in my grief … reluctant to turn to my family because they were grieving, too.

But because the grieving thief and I didn’t know each other, I had no expectations of whether I would be understood in my grief and no fear of being disappointed if I wasn’t.

This encounter made me want to stay open to the chance meeting with an important stranger, the possibility of unplanned symmetry that is luminous and magical.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**PIANO**

Unplanned symmetry out there in some unexpected DMZ

 Maybe that is what happened to Jesus

when the one leper returned

 Maybe the stranger’s unexpected gesture to Jesus

 In the Lord’s journey to Jerusalem and imminent death

 Was a startling yet fortuitous gift back to the Son of God

 Not just a “thank you”

 But an affirmation that he was on the right path

 Even though it would cost him his life

 Jesus proclaimed that the stranger was saved

 Maybe because the stranger helped Jesus

 Reaffirm his own salvific path

Living out in a land where boundaries are ambiguous

 Where strangers abound

 Lepers lurk

 And groups of “them” wait around every corner

 Is dangerous.

 Jesus invites us out into the DMZ of life

 And in that hazardous no-man’s-land

 To live out the faithfulness Paul demands of us

 In the luminous and unplanned symmetry

 In our chance encounters with the stranger

 Knowing that we are not alone

 But always accompanied by God’s brooding Spirit

 Through Christ our Lord.

Be not afraid, vss. 1 & 2

1. Richie North [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/thankless-job-alyce-mckenzie-10-07-2013.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: Expanded Edition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John Pilch, *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1997), p. 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Robert Sapolsky, “Why your Brain Hates other People: and how to make it think differently,” *Nautilus* 55 (2017), online at <http://nautil.us/issue/55/trust/why-your-brain-hates-other-people-rp> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Leslie Guttman, “Important Strangers,” <https://thisibelieve.org/essay/76927/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)