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)