

A Sermon for DaySpring on Covenant Day

by Eric Howell

A Village on the Borderlands

Luke 17.11-19

October 9, 2022

DaySpring's Covenant Day gives us the opportunity to pause for a moment in reflection on what church is, what we're called to be, and who we are today. It's a chance to look back in gratitude for the folks who ventured to meet as a church and then invited others to join them, not really knowing if anyone would. They are folks who called their first pastor a year and a half into their life together. Together they welcomed more and more new folks who joined them. Together they acquired this property, gave the money, made the plans, and constructed this sanctuary. "Leave lots of windows," they said. We want an indoor space to meet, but we don't want to forget where we are. The worshipping life of the church, for us they said, is not for a sealed-off room with lights turned down low, a place that's not a place, a time that's not a time, prayers that don't rise from the real world. "Leave the windows wide open," they said, "Let the light in. so we see the trees and the occasional deer, and the birds, and rain, and once or twice the snowfall, and remember where we are rooted. That we may always remember to see where we are, like Moses at the burning bush, to have eyes wide open to the world, always attentive to where God is in the world."

"This is Church," they said. "Let us work on this building and then let the building work on us."

Canadian writer Margaret Visser puts it so well about church, church architecture, and sanctuaries, when she says, "A church is a recognition, in stone and wood and brick, of spiritual awakenings. It nods, to each individual person. . .It constitutes a collective memory of spiritual insights, of thousands of mystical moments. A church reminds us of what we have known. And it tells us that the possibility of the door swinging open again remains. . . When it works, it blows your mind."

What is Church? A manifestation in stone and wood . . .that's good.

What other images might we use for church and church life? I am sure that for some people, perhaps for some of you, that's a hard question. Or at least a question that receives a hardened answer. Church can be a lot of things and some of them hurt. If that's been true for you, and yet you're still here today, some kind of grace is working in you and through you. May that grace bring healing. This morning we read in Jeremiah about a people going to exile. Maybe you've felt exiled from God because of Church in your life. If so, may you find a gentleness here that welcomes you back however you need it.

When thinking about images for church life, I remember an observation on the 50th anniversary of his aunt and uncle's wedding by one spiritual writer who saw three signs in their relationship of a good marriage. A marriage, he said, is a warm fireplace, a big table, a container that holds suffering.

It seems clear to me that each of these is also a sign of a good church. A good church isn't measured by the seats or the dollars or the programs or the square feet. A good church like a good marriage is a warm fireplace. The love people have for one another and for God generates a warm place not just providing warmth for the people in the congregation but for everyone else who comes near them—children, neighbors, community, everyone who meets them.

A church is a big table, loaded with lots of food and drink. It's a place of hospitality, a table where people come to be fed, because it is sacramental, always containing more than enough surplus to feed everyone fortunate enough to meet it.

A good church is a container that holds suffering. The old axiom holds, "Everything can be borne if it is shared." Church is not a place where suffering is shame; suffering is holy, and sharing the suffering of another is holy. Sometimes and in some places, suffering is a consequence of faithfulness to Jesus; shared suffering is a sign of the compassionate heart of God.

In each of these ways and in so many others, a good church is like a good marriage. This is good to think about today, on the church's Covenant Day, as we remember and renew our relationships and the stone and wood and the warmth of our fire and the abundance of our table and the wide and deep container for suffering, all in the spirit of God.

We have yet another image of church life in our Gospel reading this morning: a village. Jesus enters an unnamed village. What if that village were an image for Church?

The village in Luke 17 is located somewhere in a kind of no man's land, the region between Samaria and Galilee. In the region between Samaria and Galilee, Jesus is in a geographic borderland, in the in-between space, that is neither Samaria nor Galilee. Surely the gospel writer Luke is telling us something more than a geographical footnote for the story. This is theological geography. This village is neither here nor there, neither in nor out. He's going to Jerusalem to glory, but he's not there yet. Instead, he's in the backwoods, the hinterlands, the outskirts, the unknown places of unnamed people. The village doesn't even have a name. The region between Samaria and Galilee is a place between the places where people stay who only stay among their own kind. Samaritans stay with Samaritans in Samaria. Galileans stay with Galileans in Galilee. But here, in the in-between place, there's a place where the lines are blurred. This is a third space. There's yours and there's mine, but here there's something that's both yours and mine and neither yours nor mine. And the reality is that on the maps of the first century there is no region between Samaria and Galilee. It's a theological claim and setting for where the story of healing takes place.

This space is a hybrid space that "transcends ...geography, ...culture, religion, economics, and politics." (Francisco Garcia, Working Preacher, Luke commentary). This is especially true for the suffering. In this village between places, Jesus meets a group of 10 lepers. Lepers are bound together by their dislocation from every other community they would have otherwise known. They met Jesus somewhere on the streets of the town. The gospel story doesn't tell us if they

were seeking him or if they just looked up and there he was in their path. Sometimes, we meet Jesus through our best intentions. Sometimes, Jesus just shows up in our way.

“Jesus, Master” they yell to him from a certifiable distance. “Jesus, Master,” they say. In Luke’s gospel only 3 times is Jesus called by name: by a demon (4.34), by a blind man (18.38), and by these lepers who cry out not just “Jesus,” but “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.”

And they are healed. They are healed somewhere on the way to go find a priest as Jesus instructed. One commentator puts it so very well, “The healing encounter between Jesus and the ten men with a skin disease, a condition that relegated them to a life of [physical, mental, and economic suffering], converts the borderlands between Galilee and Samaria from a forbidden wasteland to a sacred place, perhaps even a thin place where the veil between the material and the spiritual worlds is lifted, and an awareness of their interconnection is more deeply known and felt. (Francisco Garcia)” As Margaret Visser put, “it [becomes] a place where the door can swing open again.”

If Church is a warm fireplace, a big table, a container for suffering, Church is also a village in the borderlands, on whose narrow streets, Jesus roams. Consider this image with me. Amongst the hustles and bustles of ordinary village life, the shopkeepers and their coffee shop conversations, between the sweeping of the streets and the taking of the trash, the meals prepared and served and enjoyed, the administration of the town and the disagreements between neighbors, the noise of children playing ball, amongst the signs new construction and the long-deferred maintenance . . . between the houses where babies born and those that shed the tears for those who pass away, in all the full hearts and all the heartaches. On those streets of that village, you’ll turn a corner, and there meet Jesus. And you can see and speak to Jesus, and you will be seen and heard by Jesus.

People get healed this way, even people who don’t feel like they belong anywhere there. They get their lives turned around this way. They are transformed like this. And when they are, sometimes, they come back and fall at the feet of Jesus in thanksgiving.

He’s here in the village. He’s not contained, set apart, enclosed in a shrine somewhere on the highest hill. Walking along the narrow alleys and streets late at night, early in the morning, all hours of the day, all seasons of the year. If you see him, give him a greeting. He’ll be glad to see you. And if you pray for mercy, you will be seen by the compassionate eyes of Jesus.

Church is like a village in the borderlands of what has been and what will be, in the sacred geography that is both here and there, both then and now, both mundane and sacred. It’s full of the ordinary--ordinary time, ordinary conversations, ordinary meals. But if you keep your windows open and your eyes open, and if you make room for the stranger and the suffering . . . If your fireplace is kept kindled and your table kept full, you’ll find Jesus here. I promise he’s here. And the door to him can swing open again because the door, whether it is wide open or shut tight, is within you. It always has been.

One of the ten healed lepers returned to Jesus, fell at his feet, and gave him thanks. This is not the polite manners of social convention; this is a heart that is broken in a body that has been made whole. This is Eucharist. He falls at the feet of the one whose own body will be broken so that all may be made whole. May our faith make us well; may our thanksgiving and praise flow freely, may the gates of this village of God be open wide for all who come to meet the divine stranger who still wanders the ordinary, sacred pathways of our lives.

And for him, Thanks be to God.

Copyright by Eric Howell, 2022