

The Trouble with People

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Preaching on:

Luke 17:11–19

Beloved, lately, I'm finding democracy to be a bit of a contradiction. Democracy, which I believe in deeply as the best basis for politics and governance is only possible because of people, because of all of you. All of us People make democracy possible. And then those very same people ruin democracy, Fake news, conspiracy theories, ex extreme political views normalized in social media streams lately, I've been wondering if democracy for the people by the people can actually survive. The people you see. And I know you know this is true. People are stubborn, they're rude, they're loud, they're opinionated, they're prejudiced, they're selfish, un thoughtful, unkind people have large carbon footprints. And it is a proven fact that the less expertise people have in a subject, the more confident they are that they are right on a topic. And the less they are able to recognize that they are mistaken, people are poorly designed. No offense, <laugh>. I'm saying all this this morning because I know that many of you are feeling exactly how I've been feeling lately, that people are just the worst. People are going to ruin the present and they're going to destroy the future. Maybe I'd be better off without you people. Well, not you people, but you know everybody else. If there were no other people, I wouldn't have to worry about the climate or the midterms or the next session of the Supreme Court or nuclear

war in Europe or anything.

You've all been telling me how worried you are, how angry you feel, how threatened you feel, how hopeless you are that things are ever going to get better, and how much you hate the people whose opinions and policies and votes have gotten us into all this trouble. Well, it's right to feel despair for a little while, but ultimately we Christians must turn ourselves towards hope. And yes, our reasons for despair are serious and they feel overwhelming. But our reasons for hope and God and for hope in the gospel of Jesus Christ are far greater. And what choice do we really have? Beloved, welcome to reality. We can't get rid of other people. Other people are not just basis for democracy. They're the basis for the whole world and civilization that we live in. Hopelessness for the potential in other people is maybe the very biggest threat to our future together. So let's get into the text this morning. We're gonna go backwards because we need to start with Jesus's despair. Jesus says this morning, We're not 10 made clean. So where are the other nine? Did none of them give glory to God except this foreigner? And do you hear the hurt and the despair and the pain and the worry and the fed upness in Jesus' voice with other lousy people?

Jesus was constantly disappointed by people, right? His own disciples did not understand him. His family, when he began his ministry, they started to call him crazy. When he went back to his hometown to announce that he was going to start going around and announcing, proclaiming the kingdom of God, his own hometown crowd tried to kill him. And remember where Jesus is heading to, He, he's being assaulted by the authorities. People are trying to grind him down with every good deed that he does, people come to him for healing. And then some of those very same people criticize him for healing. And Jesus is predicting where all this is going to go. He is predicting the kind of trouble that he is going to get himself into. He is predicting that he is going to die on the cross. Betrayed, abandoned, executed, did. Jesus had a lot of reasons to feel hopeless and to give up on people. But he doesn't give up. He doesn't stop healing people when they come to him and yell at him, Hey, heal us too. He doesn't stop preaching the very message that all those people are criticizing him for preaching. He doesn't stop teaching. He doesn't stop reaching out, and he doesn't stop setting himself up for massive disappointment.

Why not? How was he able to do it?

Moving backward through the text. Now we come to these 10 men who have a skin disease. Now that is a recent update in the translation, the nr s v updated edition going all the way back to the King James version of the Bible. You probably have traditionally heard this passage known as the passage of the 10 lepers. Now, the reason that it's been updated to say skin disease is that all biblical scholars and medical specialists and historians agree that leprosy the true leprosy Hansen's disease, the disease we know today did not exist in first century Palestine. Where Jesus was doing his ministry, it's a mistranslation. They saw in the text skin diseases that were causing people to stay away from one another. And it seemed like, well, it must be the worst skin disease you can think of. And so they called it leprosy, but it didn't exist then.

And the problem with this translation is that we have come to believe that the reason that these 10 men held themselves away from, from the rest of the people and didn't come close to Jesus is because they were under some sort of reasonable medical quarantine. But they weren't. The skin diseases that they had were not necessarily contagious at all. It could have been a patch of really bad acne. It could have been psoriasis. It could have been a little melanoma. It could have been something that you have or have had or are dealing with in your life right now. There was nothing medically wrong with them that forced them to be on the outside of society. It was a social ostracization. Having something wrong with your skin was something that made you ritually impure. It just meant that you were not able to be around other people because you could transmit this sort of ritual profanity to other people.

It was basically a social disease. You couldn't come near other people simply because you had some sort of mark on your skin that made you unacceptable for the temple. And that meant unacceptable for all of life. For all of people who were connected to the temple. It was a very difficult way to live. So it wasn't quarantine, it was exile. They had been pushed out. And yet having experienced the very absolute worst of society's unfairness and unkindness to others, they call out. They haven't given up. They're not yet totally hopeless. They believe that it's worth it to call across the distance of their ostracization and to ask for healing. Why? Why?

And I think the answer is very, very simple. It is simply because the pain of being outside of society, the pain of being outside of your community is a pain that is worse than death. We think other people are the problem. But really, what would our lives be without other people? Our lives would have very little meaning, very little joy, very little comfort. We would have no love, no relationships, no friends, no books, no movies, no culture whatsoever, no ability to participate in this world. Not to mention you'd have to do everything for yourself. You'd have to grow your own food. You'd have to build your own house. You'd have to sew your own clothes. You'd have to take out your own appendix. We cannot survive without other people. And the only thing that insulates all of us from this understanding, the thing that allows us to wallow in our despair and to fantasize about a world without all those idiots filling it up is our own privilege. That's it. People at the margins, people forced into exile understand better than we do about the absolute necessity to belonging to a people, to being on the inside.

The 10 men with a skin disease. They had no choice. They weren't not allowed to participate. They were thrown out. But we, we have a choice. Will I take the hard path to participation in this world and with people and hope for the future? Or will I remain on the comfortable path of voluntary withdrawal and despair? That's the choice that we have before us. That's the choice that I struggle with every day that I turn on the news. For these 10 men, there is only one choice. And so from a distance they call out. And from a distance, God responds. So beloved, let us remember what Paul teaches us. That there is nothing, absolutely nothing that can separate us from God's love and healing. There is no distance that God cannot overcome. There is no pain that God cannot heal. There is no sin that God

cannot forgive. That is true for me. That is true for you. And oh, oh woo. That is true for every other person in this world, no matter who they are, what they believe in or how they behave. That's the part that's hard to accept. I liked it when it was about me.

We like to hear that God loves us no matter what. It's a lot harder to hear that God loves our enemies no matter what, and that God expects the same from me. It makes us feel less special. And it reminds us of the sometimes uncomfortable truth that all people are created by God equally. So this brings me back to my despair about democracy. I think lately I've been thinking that democracy is only working when 50.01% of the people in a democracy vote for or support the right thing or the right person. And I think 99.9% of the time, I think that that usually means that the right one is the same one that I'm voting for or supporting. And I guess that's understandable at a time when we are so equally divided, our tension is focused on the unsure outcomes of our democratic processes. But it is the outcomes that are maybe not the point of democracy. Is it the outcomes that are the most important part of our democracy? Did the founders of this country say that we were going to be a democracy because the people would always make the right choice and that they would never be wrong?

No, that's not what they said. When our country was founded, it was not the outcomes of democracy that were the most important. It was the foundations of democracy. And what are those foundations? The foundations of democracy are that all people are created equal and that the individual person created and endowed with rights by God has infinite priceless value. We are a democracy because the individual right to hold an opinion, we must believe is more important than holding and acting upon the right opinion. Well, that makes perfect sense to me as a Christian, but as a person who cares deeply about truth and justice and progress, I admit it's sometimes hard to swallow.

But beloved, this is the gospel basis of our hope that nothing can separate us from God, no distance, that all of us have infinite worth, even thank God when we are wrong. And that the truth is that we don't have any choice. We need other people to survive without other people. By definition, we have stopped surviving. So let's open our hearts to God, open our hearts to our neighbors, open our hearts to hope and reach out across the distance we have put between ourselves and others. It's okay to worry and feel despair for a little while, but the gospel demands that we move towards hope and call out to one another.