Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost All Saints Church

October 13, 2019/ Proper 23 Year C

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c 2 Timothy 2:8-15

Psalm 111 Luke 17:11-19

We give thanks with our whole heart that the word of God is never chained. Amen

Just as God’s word is never chained, neither is Jesus. He’s always crossing borders, tearing down barriers, and questioning categories. We can barely keep up with him, especially in his capacity to live in the margins, and with those who have been disenfranchised.

Just think of the groups he’s with: (1) sinners and tax collectors; (2) Gentiles and foreigners and lone women; (3) the hated Samaritans; (4) Lepers; and even the

(5) Demonic.

 People all isolated, diseased, trapped, friendless, ostracized, and some labeled as Evil. The marginalized. No power visible, except, maybe, God’s power; God’s word.

 Jesus is choosing to live in the margins. It’s an interesting word we use in a lot of different ways. I was at the annual ACLU benefit last week (one of my new causes I support) and we were celebrating, after twenty years of committed work against the Death Penalty in New Hampshire, by rejoicing in the ***one-vote margin*** in the legislature that overrode the Governor’s veto. Margin- we use the word in so many ways. We ***buy stock on the margin***, which is risky if the market moves against you; we try to ***leave no margin for error***; many ***write in the margin of books***; we refer to the ***margin of critical discourse***; the ***margin of cancer tissue***; the ***margin of good taste***, and then of course, there are those ***who live in society’s margin***.

This morning, our gospel is a gospel of borderlands, of crossing over, of breaking down, of seeing, of recognizing blessings, of giving over, of giving praise… all in the margins.

In the region between Samaria and Galilee, a dangerous area, Jesus enters a village and ten lepers approach him, yet keep their distance as a sign of respect and required by social norms. These ten lepers could have an assortment of ailments from rashes, dry skin, boils, and abscesses, in mild or eruptive forms, maybe contagious, maybe not, manifested in all ways to the most dreaded of diseases: leprosy. Whatever their ailments, they are isolated from their families, their places of prayer, and from their town centers.

Jesus tells them to “go show yourselves to the priests” which means he is healing them in order for them to be presentable and acceptable to the authority. And sure enough, as they go, they are made clean. One comes back, after seeing he is healed, to thank and praise God and to prostrate himself before his new health, kissing the ground at Jesus’ feet.

Jesus sees him, and then asks about the other nine.

I don’t think Jesus is being judgmental in his question. I think he’s worried/concerned/curious about the other nine, wondering out loud what is happening to them.

Could it be that they are afraid of Jesus, as his reputation as a trouble maker is growing and they have had enough troubles for a life-time? Jesus would be very sympathetic. Could they be making a bee-line to their homes, re-uniting with their families, filled with joy of new life? Jesus would take delight in their happiness. Could they be invested in showing themselves to the priests, with the hope to stick it to the institution? Stick it to the man. See, I am whole! So there. I can see Jesus smiling, recognizing and honoring their anger. What is going on with these nine?…. and yet this…..

One returns. A Samaritan, who actually couldn’t go to the priests because Samaritans are excluded from religious community whether they are whole or not. A man, somehow separated from his country and living as a minority is not only living in the margins, but on the edge of those margins. Let’s say he’s living on the l*edge of the edge* of society’s margins. So outside the community of faith and life and customs, his only community was with those castigated with leprosy. Yet, in this gospel story, he has power.

I wonder why Jesus is always with those on the margins. Yes, his ministry calls him there, but I also think he gathers strength by living there. Maybe this man doesn’t need an institution to tell him he’s healed. Maybe, through suffering, through prayer, through his own coherency, he knows deep from within his own soul, his own resiliency, his own honor, his own recognition, and he knows…. His heart knows……that there’s no other place to be but where he can be “collapsing into God.” (Richard Rohr on surrender). And in that place, he knows he’s healed.

Maybe the other nine, so confused by what the world has told them have lost their inner compass and they need outside verification. We get so used to being outwardly confirmed- by our looks, health, successes, accomplishments, others’ opinions, that we don’t know who we are or what we desire. And so these nine, even though healed, don’t recognize it until the authority, the one who “really” knows, tells them. So maybe the nine are still walking to the priest, healed, yet not aware, because they need to be told.

Prayer when we are “collapsing into God” gives us a connection to The Source of all Life, to the Word of God that cant’ be chained. Prayer also (call them side benefits) gives us a sense of self which is untouched by our successes or failures. To feel connected through prayer gives us internal reserves; we know where our sustenance rests; no matter our circumstances, we experience wonder, awe, authenticity and passion. We can be in the present and know that our hearts have knowledge. This is power.

And it needs to be practiced. Prayer as a habit of the heart. Maybe, when we are in the margins, prayer as a habit of the heart is easier to embrace.

A friend of mine who is Jewish told me about a village in France. The town Le Chambon-sur-Lignon is situated in the southern mountains of France, a harsh place, with a cold, wind- blast environment, with its citizens living through subsistence farming. In a country that is 90% Catholic, this town is 90% Protestant (Huguenot).

For whatever reasons, no one knows, how the Protestants all showed up there, though they have suffered under a lot of persecution since the 17th century. A town living in the margins, maybe even on the edge, the ledge of the edge of the marginalized.

Their way of life is marked by hospitality, inviting the stranger in, sharing whatever meager meal they can, protecting as a natural way of living, as if it’s in their DNA. They knew persecution; their response to this day is to protect and defend.

During the Nazi regime and the Vichy sympathizing French government, Jews found their way to this village. And without any questions, the town citizens brought them in, gave them shelter, food, work, and found ways to hide them when the wrong authorities showed up. When asked today, those who remember the time, shrug their shoulders. No big deal. What else could one have done? “But you were risking your lives.”

“We are always risking our lives. That’s what living is all about.”

These simple farmers saved over 3,000 Jews.

And today, guess who’s finding their way to Chambon-sur-Lignon? By word of mouth, they are coming two by two….refugees, immigrants, sanction-seekers, and they are making their home there, with the same nonchalant shrug of the shoulders. What else could we do, but invite? We will protect you. There is no other way to live.

Maybe that’s why Jesus loved living in the margins.

Habits of the heart, prayer, collapsing into God, trusting in heart knowledge, is way to be known and to know and to have an authority and sustenance that is ruled by the Word of God that is never chained. And in that collapsing place, you are never chained, either. AMEN.