

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

October 9, 2022

To be seen

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text today from Luke's Gospel is full of blurred lines and messiness. We're told right at the start that Jesus is traveling in the border region between Samaria and Galilee. So we're already in the liminal space between two neighboring regions, the populations of which did **not** like each other. There is a long, and occasionally bloody history between the Israelites and the Samaritans. Much like the long and bloody history between the Israelites and the Arameans that is at play in the reading from 2 Kings.

But it's not just the animosity between these two groups of people that cause the blurred lines and messiness in our texts today. We also find Jesus (and Elisha) on the border between in-groups and out-groups with regard to cleanliness. The plight of lepers in the time of Christ (and Elisha before him) was truly a terrible one. They were commanded by Levitical Law to warn away any who approached them by shouting out "Unclean, unclean." They were also forced out of their communities to live alone (or with other lepers) and expected to wear raggedy clothes and be disheveled in appearance.¹ They were required to appear and act in such a way that others could easily avoid them...easily not have to interact with them...easily not even **see** them if they didn't want to.

This makes the actions of the lepers in our gospel text today rather audacious. They approach Jesus as he enters a village and rather than shouting their required script of "unclean, unclean" they instead call Jesus master and beg him for mercy. And what is his response to this audacity? Well, the first thing the text tells us is that Jesus **sees** them! Then he invites them to step out in faith and show themselves to the priests who are the only ones who can diagnose their leprosy as healed and allow them to return to their communities. Jesus doesn't tell them to wash in the Jordan, he doesn't lay hands on them, he doesn't even mention healing them at all. Instead, he

¹ [Leviticus 13:45-46](#) (NRSV)

tells them to go...to step out with the same desperate faith that led them to approach him in the first place. And they do...and they are healed.

I cannot stress enough the importance of Christ's first action in actually seeing these lepers. In this place, in this time, most would not have even looked at them. Averting their eyes, as we humans are wont to do when confronted with things we don't want to see. I can be prone to this myself, and I'm willing to bet most of you can be too. Rather than acknowledging the brokenness and messiness of poverty, addiction, mental illness, homelessness, or any number of other terrible outcomes of our broken systems; we look away.

We intentionally choose not to see the beggar on the streets. We criminalize poverty and shove thousands of people into what are essentially debtors' prisons.² We look away from failed policies that decimate communities of color.³ We ignore the systems we have created that give us cheap goods while exploiting the people and resources of the developing world.⁴ We pretend that law enforcement doesn't kill people of color at twice the rates they kill whites.⁵ All because we don't want to **see** these realities. All because we don't want to see people as people.

This is both an individual sightlessness and a systemic one. We choose not to see in order to avoid our own discomfort. But we are also taught from an early age not to see the brokenness of our systems because seeing that reality threatens those systems and those who it keeps in power. Jesus certainly saw people, but he also saw through the illusions of our broken human systems and challenged them constantly⁶. For which he was arrested, tortured, and killed on a cross.

The Israelites didn't want to see the Samaritans as people, and vice versa. And neither the Israelites nor the Samaritans wanted to see lepers as people either. But Jesus did. Jesus saw them. And, I would argue that his actions prove, he loved them. And not just this one group of ten outsiders, Jesus consistently saw people who others didn't and loved them.

² https://www.americanbar.org/groups/gpsolo/publications/gp_solo/2019/january-february/criminalization-poverty/

³ <https://www.aclu.org/other/drug-war-new-jim-crow>

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neocolonialism>

⁵ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>

⁶ e.g. [John 2:13-17](#), [Luke 6:1-11](#), [Luke 23:1-5](#)

Just in Luke alone Jesus sees a tax collector named Levi and calls him to be a disciple (Luke 5:27). He sees the woman bent double and heals her (Luke 13:11-13) even though it's the Sabbath. He shares a parable in which a priest and a scribe see a man broken on the side of the road and pass by while a Samaritan sees the same man and is moved with compassion (Luke 10:25-37). He sees the ten lepers in our text today and heals them. He sees the poor widow put her mite in the offering coffer and praises her generosity (Luke 21:2). Jesus routinely sees the people everyone else chooses not to see. And loves them.

This is, perhaps, one of the most important aspects of Christ's ministry on earth: he **sees** people. I suspect every one of us here has at some point or another felt overlooked or unseen. It's not a great feeling, is it? Yet we do it to others all the time as I previously pointed out. It's one of our great failings as humans, our unwillingness to see our neighbors, our unwillingness to see the brokenness of the world, our unwillingness to see how our own power and privilege often comes at others' expense.

Christ invites us to a different path, the Way of Christ. Christ calls us to live differently, as we were created to live. Christ calls us to **see** others as he sees them, as bearing the image of God and having inherent dignity and value. I'm not sure we can do any of the other things Christ calls us to do without first learning to see. How can we love our neighbor if we cannot even look at them? How can we love God if we won't see what God has made? How can we do justice if we ignore injustice? How can we love mercy if we won't even acknowledge the rights of others to live?

Everyone wants to be seen. Everyone **needs** to be seen. None of a person's spiritual or emotional needs can be met if they are not seen. The radical love and acceptance that Christ calls his followers to share is impossible without first seeing the people around us. We need to constantly pray that the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to the world around us that we might be faithful followers of the Way of Christ, the Way of Love, the Way of Seeing.

And what amazing things we might see if our eyes are opened! Did you notice the other time sight is brought up in our text today? It's not just when Jesus sees the ten lepers. The term is also used when the Samaritan leper sees that he has been healed! He sees a new reality that will mean he can return to his family and to his community. He sees that he no longer must live alone, wearing rags, and shouting warnings to others so they can avoid him. He sees that he has not just been healed but he has been made whole! He

sees the new reality for which he was created! He sees himself as Christ sees him!

What joy comes with this being seen and seeing! The Samaritan leper turns back, full of praise for God. He returns to Jesus and is so overcome with gratitude that falls at Christ's feet. And Jesus sees all this and names it faith.

I argued last week that faith is living as we were created to live, oriented towards Christ and his loving and gracious Way. But we find in this text today another element of faith, sight. Not the sight of the material world mentioned in Hebrews 11:1, but rather the sight of Christ. The sight that truly sees the world around us. Truly sees our neighbors. The sight that moves us to compassion, grace, mercy, and love. The sight that means acceptance and community. The sight that is seeing the kingdom of God breaking into our world and transforming it, through us! So go out, my siblings in Christ, and before anything else...**see!** Amen.