

## “Ministry in the Borderlands”

Luke 17:11-19

A sermon preached by

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In the summer of 1859 Frenchman Charles Blondin stretched a 3 inch rope 1200 feet across Niagara Falls and, balancing more than 200 feet in the air, he proceeded to tightrope walk from one side to the other. Shortly thereafter he produced a wooden wheel barrow and asked the 100,000 awe-struck observers whether they thought he could repeat his death-defying feat pushing a wheelbarrow. “Yes,” they cried, “we believe you can!” Then he asked them if they thought he could cross over Niagara with a person riding in the wheel barrow. The crowd was frantic with excitement at the proposal and shouted, “Yes, we believe you can!” “Do it!” Blondin paused and said, “OK, which one of you will volunteer to be that person?” At that the crowd fell silent.

There are many things we say we believe in, but when the decisive moment arrives we often cannot find the courage to actually do them – particularly if it calls upon us to venture out into scary places. Blondin’s story is a parable of fear and the unknown that we understand: We know scary, don’t we? Sailing through the Bermuda triangle is scary. Jack Nicholson in *The Shinning* is scary. Spending the night at Lizzy Borden’s bed and breakfast is scary. [Aside:] Sarah Palin is scary....

However, the underlying challenge of this parable is of far greater consequence because it focuses us on the edges of our belief. As Martin Luther King once said, “Our ultimate measure is not where we stand in times of comfort and convenience, but where we stand in times of challenge and controversy.” Those times are piercingly personal; they not as much death-defying as they are life-defining. Yet, when we look closely at ourselves – particularly when we are called out to the edge – we don’t always like what we see. An honest inventory forces us to admit that we may be nurturing a cowering-couch-potato kind of faith that would make insurance underwriters happy, but not our blessed assurance underwriters. Too often we have remained silent; too often we’ve failed to step forward. In a time when ignorance, fear and hate consume us like a medieval plague, we don’t have much to show for our allegiance to a God who more than 300 times said to us “Be not afraid.” It is the most repeated commandment in the Bible and one of the least heard.

In today’s passage from Luke we encounter Jesus and his disciples on their journey to Jerusalem as they are crossing the border between Galilee and Samaria. Jesus enters a village and is immediately confronted by 10 lepers. This was not unusual, as lepers regularly gathered at busy crossroads to beg for alms that passersby would – in pity and

fear - toss at them. From a distance the lepers cried for “mercy” as they had 100 times before. Then, in a move that utterly astonished them and dumbfounded everyone who witnessed it – including the disciples - Jesus moved toward them and unhesitatingly healed all 10!

The truly interesting part of the story, however, occurs in what follows. *“Then one who saw that he had been healed, turned back, praising God in a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. Now he was a Samaritan.* Then the last verse of the passage suggests something more happened. *“Get up and go,”* Jesus says, *“your faith has made you well.”* This is unusual because the phrasing sounds redundant or makes it seem as though the man has been healed twice. But looking deeper we see that this phrase is often translated as *“your faith has made you whole or brought you salvation.”* With this insight, we recognize that something else may have happened in this second encounter after the healing: because of his gratitude and professed faith the man was also saved. Think about that: this man embodies a double portion of the despised and the rejected. He was a Samaritan, a group hated by Jews, and he was a diseased leper on top of it. He could not be more unacceptable and to any good Jew he should have been shunned at all costs. Yet, Jesus singles him out not only for healing but for salvation.

Here in a distinctly borderland geography, Jesus ventures out and crosses significant cultural and religious borders to offer healing and salvation just before he declares in the passage that immediately follows, that the Reign of God is in the midst of us [Luke 17:21]. Step back and take a full view of Jesus’ entire ministry. In the man from Galilee – itself a crossroads region of many cultures and powers – we encounter a Jesus who in almost every preaching, teaching and doing offers a radical message of reconciliation and grace. Time and again he went where no one else dared to go, crossing borders of difference and overcoming barriers of exclusion to demonstrate the depth and breadth of God’s radical love. He astounded people with this borderland ministry. He took everyone to the edge and invited them a new reality, one that was radically different from the one to which they had grown so accustomed. And each time he did he gave expression to that divine border crossing our theologians call Incarnation. *“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us....”* John 1:14

Today I want to ask of us, we who call ourselves “faithful”: Where are the borderlands of our time and how willing are we to go there? Where’s the prophetic edge our ministry embodies? Who are the Samaritans and the lepers on our path? What ministry of healing and salvation do we bring as a people of faith to these borderland dwellers?

There are many borderlands, aren’t there? We know of the borderlands between the US and Mexico, Israel and Syria, Pakistan and India, Bosnia and Serbia, and, sadly, the

borders of Chad and Sudan and Georgia and Russia. We scan the globe, from the borders of Northern Ireland to Western Somalia, from Eastern Europe to Southern Korea. We cannot think of any of these borders without a sense of tragedy and fear, can we? But as worrisome as these geographic and political borders are, I am even more concerned about the borders of social, gender, racial, ethnic, and above all religious difference that separate and confound us. It is our failings in these latter borderlands that are most often the cause of the problems in the former borderlands. And if not the direct cause, then they function like steroids that grossly exaggerate differences, make them wider, more volatile and, tragically, more violent.

In the last decade, certainly since 9/11, we have all witnessed the rise of an anxiety-ridden, paranoid and fear-filled America. Do you know that 1/3 of all new homes being built in the US are in exclusive gated communities and that urban planners now speak regularly of the “landscape of fear?”<sup>1</sup> Since 2001 our military budget has more than doubled to \$711 billion, 48% of all military expenditures in the world! When it comes to dealing with those who are different from us and those whom we fear our only solutions seem to be to violently crush them or build walls to keep them out. And, of course, such a strategy denies us any chance at building relationships and it only compounds our ignorance – the primary cause of fear. It is a disease that’s spreading: our angst about those who are different from us has gone global and distinguished itself by its clumsy, ill-informed, adolescent, testosterone-filled, and muscle-flexing character. Rarely has a nation been so divided and blind to the ways in which fear is tearing at the fabric of its core identity. Our nation’s capital all but has disappeared as a city; our national shrines are now all encased in concrete barriers, guarded by check points, and bathed in the glow of ubiquitous yellow and orange threat level lights. Any visitor to Washington gets one clear message: this is a nation that is engulfed in fear and tumbling headlong back to the Middle Ages. Our walls have become the great symbol of failure; our social apartheid is now accompanied by a spatial apartheid.

Bill Bishop in his new book, The Big Sort (2008), shares some startling information about how like-minded people have begun to cluster together geographically, socially, and institutionally. In record numbers both evangelicals and liberals are choosing to live with, play with, vote with, get their news from, and worship with people who are just like them. Fewer and fewer communities can be identified as diverse; we are less of a red and blue country than we are a fire engine red and deep navy blue country. “I’m sure I’m right and I’m *really* sure you are mentally ill.”

In faith communities this plays itself out in a dramatic reversal of why people are going to church: churches are called to transform those who attend, but increasingly these

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<sup>1</sup> S. Low, CUNY, *Urban Fear: Building the Fortress City*

days churches are only seeking to ratify what their attendees have already decided. As Bishop says, “Mission has morphed into marketing.” Clergy are reluctant to offend their members and churches have less and less room for those who don’t fit the norm. As we fall deeper and deeper into this homogeneous wonderland our anxiety rises over protecting ourselves from anyone who is different. Too many of us are unable to differentiate our political world from our religious world: our beliefs are being seduced by our politics. We’ve have all but abandoned our prophetic heritage that calls us to stand over against our culture and the structures of power and give witness to a different vision of the truth.

Our growing isolation, fear, and our pronounced lack of skill for navigating the borders of our lives is sadly at the root of far too many culture wars, political tensions, and military conflicts. There is a high price to pay for our fear of the edges and our absolute dysfunction in the borderlands of difference. Here’s the new reality: The frontier is the frontier. It’s no longer outer space; it is the space between us. It’s not oil; it’s what lubricates the gears of human relationship. It isn’t food; it is the tragic gulf of powerful warring factions who prevent food from being distributed. It isn’t even the military, but rather the ignorance and fear that makes us think that violence and war are the only answers. What are we to do as we encounter the 21<sup>st</sup> century outcasts and lepers? Spit on them? Build walls? Run away? Marginalize and dehumanize them? Deport them? Invade their countries? Shoot them?

Or can we confront our fears, put our hand in to God’s and walk out to the edge of that fear and step into a different world? You and I here in this place are sojourners; we live in a world whose geography, both literally and symbolically, that is just like that place between Galilee and Samaria where Jesus walked so long ago. We, like Jesus, are confronted with people who are not only unlike us; they are people whom our society tells us we should reject, scorn and fear. But if we are true to our calling, then we must recognize that it is exactly in this encounter, right there on the threshold of human experience where the stakes are highest, that we have been called to minister and preach the Good News. Orlando Costas called it ministering with *Christ Outside the Gate*. Right there in those borderland moments is where we give others their clearest glimpse of the reign of God. We are called not to build walls, but tear them down. We are called not to widen the gulf, but repair the breach. We are called to be **Edgewalkers**.<sup>2</sup> Edgewalking demands courageous living, not cowering listlessness; faith-filled visions not fear-filled nightmares. The courage of faith is our secret weapon. It is more powerful than fear, because God is more powerful than death. We are called to

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<sup>2</sup> The term is has been used by many authors, notable among the Judith Neal Edgewalker: Praeger (2006)

experience the liminality of living and walk between the worlds of darkness and the light, between hope and fear. The borderlands are amazing: roles are reversed, the rejected are embraced, the marginalized are centralized, the first are last and the last are first. It is the place of transformation. This is where we take off our shoes – because it is holy ground.

**This is our calling:** to go to the edge and to minister in the borderlands. Yes, anxiety will come and fear will always lurk in the shadows, but the radical Good News of God’s love will not be known to the diseased, hungry, victimized, and lost souls of this earth unless there are those courageous few who are prepared to say, “Here am I, send me.” Fear will be enthroned and death will hold sway unless someone says: “Put me in the damn wheelbarrow and tell the *Spiritus Sanctus* to wheel me out!” No matter whom you are, your station in life, your race or your faith tradition: you are called to be an Edgewalker. Students, staff, trustees, alums, and faculty; young, old, gay, straight, male, female, transgender – it doesn’t matter. Be an Edgewalker. Don’t be afraid – you can do it! Your faith will sustain you.

Thus says the Lord who formed you, the God who created you: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. Do not fear for I am with you. You are my witnesses, says the Lord. (Isa 43)

A voice cries out: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings, lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, lift it up, do not fear; say to all the people “Here is your God!” (Isa 40)