

## **All in the Family**

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Faith Presbyterian Church, Sierra Vista, AZ

Sunday, September 13, 2020 – Ohana Sunday

Luke 17:11-19

### **Entering places of boundaries**

Today we are celebrating Ohana Sunday, a day in which Pastor Virginia brought the Hawaiian concept of family to Faith Presbyterian Church. Or as Lilo and Stitch tell us: "Ohana means family. Family means nobody gets left behind or forgotten."

Today we look at the story of the 10 lepers, and how one of them reminds us that all are in the family. As the story begins, Jesus is happily traveling the countryside of Samaria and Galilee, places where the good Jews of his time shouldn't go, because they are places filled with gentiles, and others like the Samaritans who don't follow the rules of the Jews in Jerusalem.

### **Being Excluded**

We are faced with a story of ten lepers who have called out to Jesus from a safe distance, and asked for help for healing.

The skin condition of the ten was probably not leprosy, or, as we know it today, "Hansen's disease." Almost any skin condition that did not appear to be normal was grounds for exclusion from society because it was a sign that these people had sinned in the sight of God. Their only occupation could be begging. These ten are not simply sick, they are outcasts in a society where there would be no hope of ever returning to their families, villages, or jobs. They are people without hope.

Jesus, who heals a lot of people in this gospel attributed to Luke, calls to these outcast lepers and tells them to go to priest to be confirmed as healed. Note that he never even says, "You are healed." These ten believe that healing has occurred, and off they go to the priests to be confirmed as healed, presumably to return to their families and homes.

### **Thankful Subversives**

The story might be over at that point, as in most of our healing stories, but then one of them returns. We're not sure even that he has been to the priest yet (probably not), but it is clear that he knows that he's been healed, for he turns back and singing praises

to God, throws himself down at Jesus feet and continues to thank him.

This person not only was healed, he realized it to the extent that he didn't need the confirmation of the priest for it, and in fact because of who he is, he can't go to a priest. It's at this moment when we discover that the former leper is one of the unacceptable – something that couldn't be discerned from the distance Jesus had to keep when they were lepers. This man is a Samaritan – the member of a despised group that doesn't follow the worship of those in Jerusalem.

I keep thinking about this story in the context of pandemics and fires we have around the state and country. Initially, all the victims of these disasters look like to us. In initial misery – they look equal.

But not in the recovery. In recovery it matters whether your job is still there, and whether you have medical insurance, and whether you own your home or rent. Like the Samaritan who was healed – those who are undocumented find themselves on the outside looking in, even as they seek to rebuild their lives.

In this story Jesus is breaking two taboos: first, because this person has not been certified as “clean” he is making himself “unclean” in the eyes of society, and second, because he is a Samaritan, he is not supposed to be talking to him. None of this matters to Jesus, who's reply is that of one astonished, saying “Is only one coming back to give thanks?”

It matters in this encounter that the healing has happened, and that this person, who doesn't worship the ways Jews did at the time, this is the one to whom Jesus says, “You active faith has made you whole.” Surprising, and a total reversal of the values of Jews held at that time. Jesus is saying, All belong to my family. In thinking about getting up close in the situation we find ourselves today, breaking down barriers of who can be with is of the many spiritual lessons we need and can learn from it.

For the Samaritan, going back to his old life might well be impossible at this point, so the risk is that he will have to create a new life, one which will serve God in new ways. It's a complicated thing, this healing the Jesus way – it requires of us giving up old identities based on our losses and hurts, and invites us into new life-giving identities that can seem, at least at first, a little scary.

## **Following Jesus**

I truly believe that following Jesus is more important than ever at a time like this. Jesus

was glad to see the Samaritan rejoicing in his healing, Jesus was willing to speak with Samaritan women, men with withered hands, folk possessed by demons, or prostitutes, even healing children of Gentiles. Since Jesus did these things, then we know the work that we can do, as healed children of the covenant.

There are ways to do this -- ways that both individuals and communities can help folk create the alternative visions for communities that give hope – where truly *all* are in the family.

First, there are people who become *threshold people*. Threshold people can see what isn't yet there, ask the questions about the current reality and foster hope out of seeing a whole picture. They make clear the lie that “normal” means being self-absorbed. They give voice to the longing, but also keep up the spirits of those who also are threshold people for others.

These kinds of people are antidotes to negative forms of individualism that neglect community, or exclusivism that keeps out people.

Many of us can name threshold people in our own lives. For me it was the Cash family who lived next door. A mother and daughter, they were a bright family, and one that reached out beyond the working-class neighborhood in which we lived. When I was young, they hosted international guests from around the world, and I met people from Africa, Asia and Europe, all exotic places to me. Later they hosted a refugee family from Vietnam, and that family is now part of my chosen family too. Nancy, the daughter, was a school teacher, and through her influence, I really got the dream to have a college education, and was the first one in my family to do so.

A second way of enhancing community is to create *hospitable space*. The notion of hospitality goes all the way back to Abraham offering hospitality to the three messengers of God. But this kind of hospitable space affords something else – where people can connect to issues in our lives without having to come to a premature conclusion, where belonging and learning go hand in hand, where the complex issues of living are examined, but the views of all are gently held, rather than firmly upheld or smashed.

## **Conclusion**

Today we are thankful to God for Faith as chosen family, and the legacy of Ohana that Virginia led and inspired in so many.

Our first invitation is to become threshold people who can become bridges in our community and our world, so that our lives can reach out to those who are different from us.

Our second invitation from the gospel is to take this value of chosen family so that it looks outward and creates hospitable space where we can safely talk about important issues in our lives.

Friends, God's dreams for the world depends on us embracing "all in the family."

Amen.