



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Beyond Clans and Tribes

October 9, 2016

The Rev. Sharon K. Gracen

One of the things that most of us know about Scotland is clan system with their colorful tartan dress - usually kilts. Each clan has a crest and motto and its own sense of tradition. Originally the clans were territorial, there are lots of clan maps that you can find - they change depending on which era they reflect. Some clans were wealthy and powerful, the MacKenzies, the Sinclairs, the Campbells and the MacDonalds, and for all Outlander fans, the Frasers. Others smaller clans sometimes aligned themselves with the powerful. Essentially, clans were tribes of the Scottish people and as usually happens, tribes don't get along with other tribes. As we traveled around and visited castles and museums we patched bits of history together. It's always telling when a story is left out of a clan's glowing presentation in their museum - after all, one might not necessarily want to lift up the time your folks went and slaughtered a whole bunch of people from a nearby clan while they were in church.

Mostly people were born into or married into their clan. But there were also those who became part of a clan by swearing allegiance to the laird, or clan chieftain. It all sounds very romantic and passionate, but really it was practical, life in the Highlands and the Lowlands was precarious. Being a part of a clan gave you community and security. Of course, it came with obligations, like taxes to the laird. And if said laird had a beef with someone, you might have to learn to wield a sword or some other violent thing on a battlefield.

Now you might wonder what clans have to do with lepers, because that's what we're hearing today. Well, there are a couple of things, religion in the time of the Old Testament and Jesus, was very much a tribal expression of religion. That was good and bad...the belonging aspect of a clan or a tribe assured security and a sense of self. Jesus was of the tribe of Judah and in that time, everyone knew what that meant, he was descended from King David. Paul would later describe himself as a member of the tribe of Benjamin. The tribes of Israel all understood their common origin, they all had Jacob as their father or grandfather. They were also aware of their particular traits. They held scripture, and practices and history in common. They were prepared to band together, at least for a while, often in response to a common enemy. The Jewish religion was profoundly tribal, surrounded by other religious tribes, and Jews held on as fiercely to their practices and beliefs as they did their territory. Their strength lay in their traditions that distinguished them from other cultures. One major tenet of Judaism, was and is its understanding of purity, making distinctions between what was clean and unclean. Leprosy, or any skin condition, made one unclean and therefore, pushed to the margins of society so that others would not be made unclean by contact.

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

www.trinitybranford.org

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You might have noticed in the story of Naaman, the general with leprosy in the story from 1 Kings, that he was not outside of society; he was a successful, powerful person, who happened to suffer from a physical ailment. He was not Jewish; he was an Aramean, from the area that is now Syria and Jordan. His religion did not include the same understanding of clean and unclean. He was a foreigner who encountered Yahweh, the God of Israel through a holy man, much like the Samaritan leper in the Luke's Gospel.

A little bit about this Gospel story, it is actually quite manipulative, in the same way that the Good Samaritan characterizes those who passed by. This story is framed to cast doubt on the gratitude of the 9 Jewish lepers, making it look as though they were not grateful because they did not thank Jesus. Going to the temple to be certified as clean, was an important part of any healing and it was always framed in grateful prayer for the power of God to bring about such wholeness. They were a) doing what Jesus told them to do, and b) following the traditions of their faith, their tribe, their clan.

I do not believe that the Samaritan was more grateful. He would not have been welcome at the Temple, as he was from a different tribe. He didn't belong there. In that moment, the only thing that he knew he belonged to was God and so he loudly expressed his gratitude in the only place he could - the location of his healing. So this is not a story of healing and appropriate gratitude but a story of belonging. It lays out for us the Belonging, with a capital B, that surpasses human, tribal understanding. We all belong to God, God's grace, love, and kindness are meant for all people and we would do well to remember that when our tribal attitudes color our experiences of others. The story was told in Luke's Gospel this way because Samaritans were the most despised other for the Jews of Jesus' time, possibly to help people overcome judgments of others.

Jesus told the Samaritan that his faith had "made him whole." The word in Greek is not just to "make whole," it is the word for "saved." Jesus said, "your faith has saved you." Was he talking about no longer having itchy, miserable skin or something grander. There are lots ways for this sentence to be translated or interpreted. I believe that Jesus was acknowledging something like "your understanding that you belong to God has made you whole." The Samaritan man's gratitude transcended any small belonging for a greater reality. He was no longer isolated, socially or spiritually. God worked through Jesus for Jew and Samaritan alike because both are beloved of God.

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If there is anything from which we all need to be saved right now it is the petty divisions that separate us from each other because they deny our fundamental connection. We as a nation are becoming virulently tribal. We focus on our differences, whether they be differences of opinion, or appearance, or heritage and then we cannot see the larger kinship that we have. One of the things that I appreciated about the Scots this summer was that they might know about and have great affection for their clan, but they were unabashedly Scottish, taking pride in Scottish accomplishments in a way that transcends difference. They aren't ideologically in lock step, they have their differences but they don't hate each other because of them.

The salvation that came to the Samaritan happened because in that moment, he had nowhere else to turn and that took him out of his tribal mindset. He could have said, "I'm a Samaritan, so I will run home and give thanks in the way that my my folks do." But he recognized God's action through this Jewish rabbi and the two connected to the Source of all belonging. For healing to come through an enemy challenges our pre- judgments.

What if we didn't wait for such a moment. What if we trusted that we all belong to the same divine tribe and worked a little harder to see past our disagreements. We are in a bit of a mess right now in this political season. Politics is inherently messy but this a bit beyond the pale. It is not religion's role to tell people how to vote but it is religion's role to speak truth to power, to remind that all human persons deserve respect and to lift up our inherent unity because we all belong to the one God, the one Source, the one Love that created us.

All of the lepers were grateful. The Samaritan wasn't more grateful, but his gratitude opened a larger experience for him and for those who heard his story because it broke down the illusion of separation. He began the story as a leper, an outcast. The story ended with him as a brother.

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