Sunda October 12, 1986
THE LEAST EXPECTED
Luke 17:11-18

From time to time, we ministers are asked to officiate at funeral services for individuals who, when they die, have no church relationship and thus no pastor. So, the funeral director will call and ask either John or me to do the funeral. Usually, the funeral director, in conversation with the family of the deceased, has sought to determine what preference the family has as to their brand of religion. They know whether to call one of us here, or a Baptist minister, or a Methodist, or a Unitarian, or some other kind.

A few years ago, I was asked to do a service of this kind, and after accepting, I was told by the funeral director and the family that the man who died was not religious and, in fact, did not particularly like priests or ministers. Then I wondered if the reason I was asked to do the service was because I seemed to be the most unlike a minister of anyone they knew. Fortunately, when I met with the family, I discovered that I had met the deceased some years earlier and, in fact, had played golf with him a few times.

About a year ago, a lawyer who is a member of this congregation called and asked if I would do a funeral service for a woman who had been a client of his and who had died. She had no immediate family members, had been single all her life, and this attorney was therefore responsible for taking care of all of her affairs. He said to me on the phone that she had not been a religious person throughout her life, and I asked if that meant that she had not been part of an established religious institution like a church, and he said that was the case. Then I asked what she had done as a life's work. It turned out that she had been a social worker all of her working life and a very good one. Indeed, she had spent a lot of her time working among the disadvantaged and giving her life on behalf of other human beings. In addition, she had carried on her work with a loving and caring attitude. In a very real way, she had worked at feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, and visiting those who were sick and in prison.

All in all, she had lived a fruitful life and had practiced the love of God to neighbor. It was an easy funeral service to do. I learned a lot about her even though I had never known her.

There are times when we can find the love of God working through the least expected people, those whom we did not think of as being religious.

Jesus knew about this in theory and in practice. Remember the story he told about the Good Samaritan? He told this story to an audience made up of people who sincerely believed that they, and they only, were the chosen of God and that Samaritans could do no good; that God had certainly banished them to hell. Yet in the story, as Jesus told it, the people we would have expected to be the most religious passed by the man who was in the ditch in need of help, and it was the irreligious Samaritan who practiced the love of God to neighbor.

The story read this morning from the Gospel of Luke carries a similar message. Jesus was met by ten lepers as he entered a village, and they wanted his help. Luke tells us that he had mercy on them and told them to show themselves to the priests, and as they went, they were healed.

“Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice, and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan.”

Frequently, this story from Luke’s Gospel is used as a text for Thanksgiving sermons, but the main point that Luke wants to make is that the individual least expected to be praising God and giving thanks did so. He was the least expected because he was a Samaritan, and Samaritans were supposed to be of the wrong religion. In Jesus’ time and before, they were considered heretics. They were considered to be unacceptable in God’s sight, not by God, but by those who were sure they knew all about God.

Who are the “Samaritans” in our time? That is, who are those that we religious people think are irreligious or have the wrong religion?

Within the Christian faith, those we call fundamentalists sometimes think of us in the mainline churches as “Samaritans,” and we in our kind of churches tend to put the fundamentalists in the “Samaritan” category.

Certainly, many Christians today think of the “secular humanists” as being the “Samaritans” of our time, or the Muslims, or the Unitarians. Gandhi of India was not a Christian according to orthodox definitions, but he was certainly a powerful agent of God.

Thus, this story from the Bible and other stories as well remind all of us that the least expected people, the Samaritans, may be showing forth God’s love in ways that we frequently miss. People we expect to be the least religious turn out to be the most religious. “God’s ways are not our ways.” Or as Jesus said, “I have many sheep who are not of this fold.”

What is it that makes religious people act exclusive? We seem to have a tendency to want to categorize people, to want to exclude people. And this is not only a tendency among religious people.

Not long ago, I overheard a discussion in which the member of an exclusive club was defending the club’s policy of limiting its membership to White Anglo-Saxon Protestants with the proper background. “We want to be free to choose our associates in the club,” the person said, “and we think that this freedom of choice belongs with life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

It may be quite legal for a private club or organization to limit its members to red-haired men with one leg or to persons who claim their ancestors came over on the Mayflower. It is our privilege to be as silly or as exclusive or as narrow as we like. But we are mistaken if we call this freedom of choice or freedom of association. It is the exact opposite of these.

When a club or group or neighborhood arbitrarily limits its membership to one kind of person, it is denying itself freedom rather than granting it. It is cutting off from possible membership all those who — despite their high personal qualifications — do not have red hair, one leg, or relatives who came over on the Mayflower.

The members of an exclusive club or group or neighborhood have actually voted away their freedom of choice. No matter how much they may like and respect a person named Steinberg or Shaughnessy, they cannot associate with that person in the intimacy of the club setting. They might invite an Einstein to talk to the group, but never to join it. This is one reason exclusive clubs or neighborhoods are so infernally dull. Sameness inevitably leads to boredom!

Now for us as Christians, the question is whether to be exclusive or inclusive in the way in which we live our lives.

In fact, one of the first decisions the early Christian church had to make after the resurrection of Jesus was whether it was going to be exclusive or inclusive. One of the first big debates in the early church was whether an individual first had to become a Jew before he or she could become a Christian. One day, the apostle Peter had a dream or vision which convinced him that the church was meant by God to be inclusive. “God has shown me,” he reported, “that I should not call any person common or unclean.” Anyone can become a Christian: slaves, free people, women, men, Samaritans, Greeks, Jews, red, yellow, black, or white.

The whole of Jesus’ life was an act of inclusion. Whereas many of the religious people of his time were setting up categories by which to exclude others, he included people of all kinds and particularly those who were rejected by others. He included the Samaritans.

There are so many benefits to being inclusive. Instead of being on guard and closed to new people, new things, new values, new ideas, and change of all kinds, the inclusive person is open to them and at least gives them consideration and in so doing finds God in the least expected places.

The inclusive person is interested in new possibilities that exist all around. This does not mean that he or she is like a blotter that soaks up everything with which it comes in contact. Inclusive people still have their values and their convictions. They respect the tradition that has produced them, but at the same time are open to seeing things in a new way. Inclusive people are inevitably growing people because they are fed by so many sources outside themselves.

Being inclusive people is the only way in which we can achieve wholeness. We cannot achieve wholeness by ourselves. No one of us is complete within ourselves.

Sometimes it takes misery and suffering to make us inclusive. “Misery loves company,” is the old saying. In fact, misery demands company.

A revealing fact, often overlooked, in the story of the ten lepers who came to Jesus for help is, as we mentioned earlier, that one was a Samaritan, while the other nine were Jews. For many, many years, the Jews and Samaritans were bitter enemies. Each thought the other had the wrong religion. But as lepers, they lived together. Their common suffering transcended their prejudice. I wonder if when they were healed, they separated again?

A flood comes to a divided community, and then White people and Black people get along with each other — their common suffering brings them together.

We can find God at work in the least expected places.

In his book entitled “On the Road with Charles Kuralt,” Mr. Kuralt has a section entitled “Unlikely Heroes,” and here he describes people he has met on his travels who to the outside world are unknown, yet each in his or her own way is doing something extraordinary. Charles Kuralt does not use religious language, but I believe what he has discovered is God at work through human beings in the least expected places.

One of the individuals he writes about he calls the “Bicycle Man.” His real name is Jethro Mann, and he lives in Belmont, North Carolina. Every poor kid in that small town seems to be riding a bike, and it’s because Jethro makes it possible.

While Jethro knows he can’t find the solution to everything that’s wrong in the world, he decided he could do something about the fact that most of the children in the town came from families who couldn’t afford a bicycle. So, in his garage, with broken bikes he has repaired and with ones he has built from spare parts, he started a sort of “lending library” of bicycles. Any kid can use one by just signing it out — no charge.

Jethro has about 35 bicycles now — all sizes, all fixed up by him. His system for lending out the bikes is the honor system. If the child fails to bring the bike back in the afternoon, tomorrow they don’t get to ride, or they don’t get to ride but a little while. So, he says, they are pretty nice about bringing them back, and we try to use this as a learning situation for them, teach them to be responsible for something, teach them that if they’ll take care of other people’s things, they can’t help but take care of their own. It works out pretty good.

In addition, Jethro Mann also fixes bikes for little kids, and he then teaches the little kids to repair the bikes for littler kids.

Along toward supper time each evening, the bicycles return. And the children who signed them out carefully now sign them in. Jethro has a full-time job, by the way, working for the state. He gives all his spare time to this. Kuralt asked him if this didn’t cost him most of his money. And he said that it cost him a good bit of it. But he enjoys spending it this way.

Open your eyes! The good news is that God is at work in the world and often in the least expected people and places — even in you and me. Amen.