



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: "Life on the Frontier"
Comment:
Author: The Rev. Tyler A. Strand

Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament Ruth 1:8-19a
Epistle 2 Timothy 2:8-15
Gospel Luke 17:11-19

God doesn't seem to want to let me off the hook for having chosen last Sunday for our "Thanksgiving" or "Harvest Festival." It turns out that England and Canada are holding theirs today. The Gospel reading for today is the one used by many churches in the U.S. for Thanksgiving, and so it would have been perfect if we had used today for our observance. But never mind: as I said last week, there isn't any day that is inappropriate for giving thanks. And today's Gospel gives our thankfulness a special "spin".

It is obvious that the story of the healing of the lepers is meant to show how thankful the one man is compared with the other nine ingrates who forget all about Jesus in their joy at being restored to wholeness. That is indeed a feature of the story. But there is more.

It is significant that this episode takes place on the frontier- the border zone between Galilee and Judah. Galilee, we are told, was "mezitso", even mongrel territory- a place where people of different races, languages and religions lived amongst each other and influenced each other. There were Hebrew Jews, foreign converts, Greek merchants, Roman politicians and soldiers, and members of the mysterious

Samaritan minority who kept the Jewish Faith in their own, particular way. Pious Jews, who pretended to be racially and religiously pure, looked down their noses at people from Galilee, and we get subtle idea through the Gospels that Jesus and his disciples weren't taken seriously by some precisely because people could see and hear that they were from the barbarous North: the Igorots of the Palestinian world.

So it is that when the ten lepers are healed, it is not just anybody who returns to give thanks to Jesus who is the channel for the divine healing, but a member of the Samaritan minority. Jesus makes the point that the so-called "real Jews," the ones who claimed to be keeping the True Religion, are the ones who forget the spirit of the Faith and the importance of recognizing God's hand in what happens in the world. It couldn't have been much more shocking to Jesus' followers to have him hold up this particular man as a good example: a leper, and therefore a handicapped outcast of society, and a Samaritan: member of a despised religious minority.

What does this episode say to us? We, too, live on a frontier. Manila is "our own private Galilee"; full of people from various countries, languages, religious groups and races, and that is especially true right here. No single group has absolute majority anymore in our congregation at Holy Trinity. Even our denomination, the Episcopal Church in the Philippines, is known in church circles as "The Minority Church" because the majority of its members are from the mountain tribes of the Cordilleras. We couldn't avoid being "meztiso" if we tried!

Foreignness is a concept that runs throughout the Bible. The Israelites in the Old Testament were very conscious of their status as a minority tribe in the ancient Middle East, and their religion that proclaimed only One God made them especially suspect. When they got to the Promised Land, they never quite figured out how to live in harmony with their neighbors; they were always afraid of losing their identity. It is only in its later stages that Judaism took a deep breath and allowed God to be everybody's God, not just a tribal superhero. Jewish religion still walks a fine line between the particular identity of being a Chosen Race, and the revelation that they gave the world of a single, universal God who is concerned about all peoples, regardless of race or national origin.

Holy Trinity is a living parable of this. We are all foreigners in some sense: Filipinos in our congregation may feel that they are in an expat church, but expats always know that they are in a foreign country. Living with that, gracefully, is part of our calling as Christians in this place. If we need an example to follow in Pinoy-Expat relations, especially in families, we have today's first lesson: the ultimate story about races and nationalities getting along where the Jewish woman, Ruth, expresses her love for and faithfulness to her mother-in-law from Moab, Naomi.

But our mixed race identity also means that we can't automatically identify with any one of the characters in today's Gospel Story, because to some degree, depending on where we are in our society and who it is that we are with, each of us is both a member of a majority and at the same time of a minority as we coexist in this parish. It is a measure of our thankfulness to God how we live with our status as expat and native, as foreign and yet at home. Last week we gave thanks for the many gifts that God has given us. Today we can observe our Lord's teaching in a whole new way, giving thanks both for the challenges of multicultural life and for the richness it offers us here on the frontier in "Metro Galilee": where there must be no disenfranchised minorities, only more colors for our parish rainbow.