

AMOR November 13 homily

Let me begin with a story from Anthony de Mello.

The Master said, to a social worker "I fear you are doing more harm than good." "Why?" "Because you stress only one of the two imperatives of justice. "Namely?" "The poor have a right to bread. "What's the other one?" "The poor have a right to beauty."

The great Dominican cardinal and theologian Yves Congar said that "every idea is geographical." When we look at our bodies, they reflect our borders and markers; our colors, race, ethnicity, language, class and gender are all markers and could become borders. Borders are places of drama and danger. We put up all sorts of barriers. Maybe it is human nature to draw lines, to separate ourselves from others, to be different from others, to feel safe from others. The other is unknown, the other is a suspect, the other is not me. The danger is that easily borders and markers are signs of division, of superiority, and of exclusion.

In the gospel today, Jesus is somewhere "between Samaria and Galilee." The only place scarier than a border is an in-between-place, where boundaries and borders aren't clear. Borders give us a certain security and control. When one finds herself in an in-between-situation, one is prone to more danger and lawlessness, one feels helpless and powerless. Overseas contract workers, slum-dwellers and marginalized persons find themselves in this social context. Their social location is a place of insecurity and vulnerability.

The ten lepers in this story call out to Jesus across a line, the distance prescribed by the law because of their ritual impurity. They know their place, and their people: they are outcasts, united by their suffering and their exclusion from the wider community. They don't come close, and Jesus doesn't touch them, as he often does when healing the sick. Just a word, a command sends them on their way to do what lepers are supposed to do when they're healed – go show themselves to the priest and get him to stamp the certificate that says they're safe to re-enter society. (They have to make sure their paperwork is in order, and they're properly documented.) But while they're still on the road, they look at one another, and each one at himself, and they see that they're healed. Only one of them, a despised Samaritan, comes back to say thank you.

The healed Samaritan was disobedient. Jesus told the ten lepers to go show themselves to the priests. Nine obeyed. The Samaritan disobeyed. Was it simply because he didn't belong to their group and religion? He was not going to go to their priests to declare he was clean. He did not care about their priests or their laws. He was just giving credit to where credit was due. He felt he had to go back to Jesus.

The one who, in a sense, has nothing to lose in turning away from the path to the Temple – organized religion has nothing to offer him, really – nothing to lose in going back to the man who made it possible for him to just be a human being again. A healthy and whole human being. He may be an outsider here; a "them" to the crowd around Jesus, but a word from Jesus, spoken in compassionate concern, gives him salvation,

that is, healing, because it tears down the wall that has kept him on the edge of society – a leper and a Samaritan, an outsider and impure.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her beautiful sermon on this text, agrees that the nine were fulfilling expectations and doing their duty by obeying the Law. She writes that "Ten behaved like good lepers, good Jews; only one, a double loser, behaved like a man in love." She thinks then about how hard he tries to fulfill expectations and obey rules and be a good church-going person, like so many of us. "I know how to be obedient," she writes, "but I do not know how to be in love."

The Samaritan knew how to love authentically. There is no other way to love than to disobey what is not essential and to focus on what matters most. Disobedience becomes a virtue in the light of true love. He disobeyed because he saw Jesus as someone greater than the requirements of an organized religion. He saw Jesus as a border-crosser or as marker-less person. He knew in his heart Jesus is truly a sign of God's compassion for sinners, the blind, the lame, and lepers. He felt welcomed in the new community Jesus was forming. Indeed the story is about the disobedient Samaritan. His disobedience is his right to beauty.

Once again, the Gospel provides the most unlikely teacher for us. Sometimes it takes someone else, unexpected, to open our eyes to blessings and wonders in our lives. A person on the margins, on the outside, may have a better vantage point to look inside and see the heart of the matter. When has someone else, unexpectedly, helped you to see something important? You had just finished your immersion to the different communities, have you met someone who pointed you to Jesus. Have you talked to someone who inspired you to look again at your faith? Have you encountered persons who challenged you to live your religious life more radically?

Let me end with a quotation from the recent interview with Pope Francis:

If the Christian is a restorationist, a legalist, if he wants everything clear and safe, then he will find nothing. Those who today always look for disciplinarian solutions, those who long for an exaggerated doctrinal 'security,' those who stubbornly try to recover a past that no longer exists—they have a static and inward-directed view of things. In this way, faith becomes an ideology among other ideologies.

As you reflect on the challenges of being a prophet and a mystic in today's context, may you be inspired by the Samaritan leper who knew who made him whole as well as Pope Francis whose witness is making the Catholic Church more engaged to the poor and the excluded.

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