

Location and Direction

Sometimes it amuses me what items from our modern culture seem to echo in my mind when I begin reading the scriptures for each week. This passage from Luke reminded me of what I have been repeatedly told by realtors about property whether buying or trying to sell---and their advice is also echoed on all the HGTV shows about property values...that mantra is simply "location, location, location!" Location is all that matters. As you can see from the title and from the opening verse of our passage, Luke actually has two things he considers of importance to point out to us, one of which is indeed location. In our first verse we heard both location and direction mentioned. Luke 17:11: "On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee." It has been several chapters since the narrative has told us that Jesus has "set his face to Jerusalem" and there has been a steady sense that this has influenced all of the instructions he has been giving as he prepares those making this journey with him for the conclusion of his mission. Jesus has described what awaits him there, but continues the journey with these visits in villages along the way, teaching about the reign of God and healing as he continues. The destination is never in doubt, but the journey does not seem to be following a direct route and few places are exactly named. Perhaps that is why it is easy to overlook what is named as the location of this village encounter. We are told Jesus is going through the region between Samaria and Galilee---except that there is no such region; at least not defined on a map. Once this area was the Northern state of Israel, but it separated from Judah in the 10th century. It was conquered by the Assyrians empire which took the ruling class into the first exile experienced by the Jewish people and then repopulated the area with Mesopotamian peoples. These folks intermarried with the remaining Israelites which led to what the Jewish people who returned from exile considered an ethnically impure branch of the family of Jacob. Over time, Samaritans developed their own religious traditions, emphasizing devotion to Torah but having affiliations with the sanctuary near Shechem, not the Temple in Jerusalem. Although the two groups shared many beliefs, including those found in the Torah, the differences came to dominate their interactions so they looked upon one another as "foreign" and "other". The divisions between the groups became more hostile while the Judeans who worshiped at the Temple destroyed the sanctuary near Shechem. Although not a defined physically separated region as Jesus entered this village, it was in an area where what is being described is probably an area where people of mixed loyalties lived in close proximity. Some were loyal to the Temple in Jerusalem, some were not---they were Samaritans. In this sense, Jesus was in an "in between-area" Jesus has crossed boundaries between Jewish villages and Gentile sites; now it seems he has entered a village where two groups which are traditionally hostile to each other are in close proximity. We have areas like that in our society today. Within our towns and cities there are markers which divide which are not shown on any map, but which just as surely divide the people as any actual barrier. There are even within neighborhoods, people who have allowed differences over issues to divide them so that they no longer speak to one another. As Jesus approaches this village, there are ten lepers who approach him. As required by the laws of their time, they keep the required distance established in Leviticus which quarantines them and keeps them apart from all interactions with others. They approach as a group, recognizing Jesus, calling out; "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" We are told that Jesus' response comes when he saw them, was to say to them

“Go and show yourselves to the priests.” While identifiably infected persons can easily be quarantined, they can resume interaction with others only when a priest determines that the disease is cured and the prescribed sacrifice has been performed. The ritual significance of skin diseases explains why varying terms such as cleansed can be used to describe their “cure”. In many of the encounters where Jesus heals, he touches an individual, but not all. In most of the healing encounters, it is a one to one interaction. Here a group of ten is cured of their leprosy, and not by touch. Jesus has not said a word about sin, or forgiveness. We are told what they have asked of Jesus, but Luke only tells us that Jesus saw them as they approached him. The narration does not tell us why Jesus responded with the instruction to just go and fulfill the requirements of the Mosaic Law. What we are told is that they respond to Jesus’ words by changing their direction. They have approached him, crying for mercy, but stopping at the required distance. When they are told to go to the priests, they obey and turn away and as they head off to the priest, they are made clean. Up until this point, all of these ten have acted in exactly the same manner. They have been outcasts together. They have obeyed the traditions required under Torah in the same way. They have recognized Jesus and approached him with the same request for mercy. And upon hearing his instructions, have together turned to obey him. In verses 15-16, we discover that the group of ten is not all identical after all. “Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him.” One of the ten, on his way to be re-instated into his community, when he saw that he was indeed healed, turned back to give thanks and to praise God. Only one. The other nine had received the same healing, but only one felt called to express thanks to the one to whom he had cried for mercy. What happens with the other nine, we learn no further details. We can assume that their visit to the priest was successful and they did return to restored community life in the village. But we do learn another detail about the one individual who returned to give thanks and to lift his voice in praise to God. When he returned, Luke adds this detail about him. “And he was a Samaritan.”

Considering the hostile relationships between Jews and Samaritans of the day, that inclusion was probably said with surprise, much like the reaction to the parable of the Good Samaritan. We are told what the composition of the group of ten was; whether there was only one Samaritan or if the group had other Samaritans. But evidently there were others in the group who were not Samaritan. In verses 17-18 it seems even Jesus is surprised. “Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Jesus has one more comment to make to the healed Samaritan: “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” This last statement has clear theological implications for the word translated “made well” also means rescued or saved. It is not clear here where this is simply a reference to the already accomplished healing of the leprosy or if by returning this individual has exhibited faith which gains him salvation in a different sense. The Samaritan’s response in prostrating himself before Jesus was an extravagant gesture, one taken before a king or ruler, a position of worship. So perhaps, the Samaritan’s insight was greater than most and salvation was granted. There is no further response from the now healed Samaritan. In fact, since in this entire encounter there is no mention of the disciples, when Jesus looks around and asks about the other nine, no one answers. Perhaps that is intentional on the part of Luke—perhaps it is because the answer is

obvious, anyone there saw ten who asked to be healed and left together but only one is now present...and no one there actually knows where those nine are or what they are doing...but perhaps the author wants us to think about which group we might be in...when we receive blessings do we return thanks and praise or do we return to our daily lives..... When Luke begins this narration with the information that Jesus, on his way to Jerusalem has chosen to go through the region "between" Samaria and Galilee, he is telling us that Jesus is going down along the east side of the Jordan River—through areas where the Samaritans and Jews do live in close proximity and which most Jews would avoid since they would avoid areas of contact. Just like we avoid areas where we might contact those outside the boundaries or barriers we establish. Jesus has crossed many borders in his ministry—going to the Gentile side of Galilee, actively walking a path to encounter outcasts and those living at the edges of society's boundaries. So this passage lifts up two images for us to consider: location and direction. When we establish the boundaries around our location—not just the physical boundaries like our gated communities, but the social boundaries—we need to also consider the direction those boundaries indicate that we are moving in our lives. Our we moving toward our Lord in obedience to his guidance, following in his way, and also giving praise and thanksgiving, or are we going on our own way. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.