

October 13, 2019 – Ruth 1:1-19 & Luke 17:11-19

It's hard to be on the outside looking in. It doesn't really matter the reason or situation, being an outcast is a difficult position to be in. And it's a pretty universal feeling. Virtually everyone at some time in their life feels like they're not part of the group.

I remember my first day of high school. I had gone to grade school for my entire childhood at the parochial school connected to our church. My father had been the principle. My mother had been a teacher. My godfather was the pastor. In every classroom were teachers that I knew just as well outside of class as inside. And I was part of a student body totaling about 90 each year. 90 students in the entire school. Not quite as small as Zion in Lone Elm. But pretty small.

And then I walked into high school as a freshman. And I knew no one. I didn't know any teachers. I didn't know any students. I was absolutely alone. And part of a student body totaling over 700. I had gone to grade school among 90 students, and now was in a freshman class of 130.

Needless to say, it was a rough transition. Made even rougher by the fact that I wasn't exactly a social butterfly. Then, as now, I was overweight. I was a nerd. I had been one of the smart kids in my other school, but now I was far closer to the middle of the pack. I felt like a complete nobody. Like I was looking in from the outside at virtually everything that went on in my school.

Maybe you had a similar experience. Maybe not. Maybe you were the prom queen or the track star or the valedictorian. Maybe you were a rebel or in poverty or, like me, just too awkward and ordinary to stand out.

And that's true in the Bible too. As much as the Bible may look to be full of utterly extraordinary people, it's also full of outcasts and rejects from society. For every Abraham famous for his acts of faith, there's a Jacob famous for his acts of deceit. For every David who defeats giants, there's a Hezekiah who's just happy his kingdom isn't falling apart. And just as the Gospel is proclaimed through those men and women of fame, it is also proclaimed through those men and women of infamy.

We have two of those men and women of infamy in our scripture lessons today. Though we may not even realize what kind of outcasts they really were.

First we have Ruth. What's wrong with Ruth? Seems like a nice enough girl. Tragically loses her husband. Gets remarried. Ends up listed in the genealogies of both David and Jesus. How bad could she be?

Well, to an Israelite, pretty bad. You see, Ruth was a Moabite. She was born and raised in the nation of Moab just east of Israel. The nation that we now call Jordan. Moab had spent years at war with Israel and, when the book of Ruth begins, it had only just recently had been conquered by the Israelites. And God had specifically singled them out by law: *"No Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, even down to the tenth generation."*

You see, Moab was infamous for their women. Who would seduce Israelite men, become their wives, and then flood the nation with Moabite gods. The last time that the Israelites had gotten involved with Moabite women, they had ended up worshipping the Baal of Peor instead of the Lord and 24,000 Israelites had ended up dying in the plague that God sent to punish them. They had learned their lesson: Stay away from Moabite women. They're nothing but trouble.

And what had Ruth done? She had seduced an Israelite man, gotten him to marry her, and then convinced him to stay in Moab among the Moabite gods and make it his home. To an Israelite, Ruth was everything that God had warned them about.

There's a very good reason why Naomi tried to convince Ruth to stay in Moab. Going into Israel meant going into a new life as a second-class citizen. No matter what Ruth did. No matter how upstanding her lifestyle. No matter how much she might try to look like a Jew. She would forever be a woman from a cursed people. And to make matters worse, a widowed, unemployed, destitute woman at that.

In our Gospel lesson we see another person from a cursed nation: a Samaritan. Remember how God was so strict about Israelite's marrying outside their nation and religion? Well, Samaritans are what happen when that warning is ignored.

Samaritan's were, to use a rather crude term, "half-breeds." A mix of Israelite and Assyrian blood. Following a religion that blended together worship of the Lord with the worship of Assyrian gods and idols. And as far as any Jew was concerned, Samaritans were all traitors and sell-outs. Despised and rejected in every way.

So this man is a Samaritan, but he's not just any Samaritan. He's a Samaritan with leprosy. What was leprosy? We don't really know for sure. Today it's a specific bacterial infection also known as Hansen's Disease. Back then, it could have been one of many diseases. A severe staph infection, syphilis, fungal infections, or any number of other disorders.

Just about any disease that caused skin lesions could be labeled leprosy. Which meant that no one knew exactly how fatal it was or how contagious it might be. They just knew that they didn't want to take a chance by coming anywhere near a leper. Which forced men, like the Samaritan in our Gospel lesson, into isolated colonies where they would beg from a distance and try to stay alive in the midst of abject poverty.

Ruth and the Samaritan leper. Two outcasts from society. Two people from cursed nations. Two people carrying a social stigma that left them impoverished and alone. But surprisingly, two happy endings as well.

Ruth, who didn't turn out to be a Moabite seductress infecting the people with her false gods. But instead accepted the God of Israel with all her heart. And in so doing found the love of a good and decent man Israelite man named Boaz. And a marriage that cleansed her of both her nationality and her social stigma.

And the Samaritan, who didn't run back into the arms of sin and society when he was healed like his nine friends. But instead turned back to Jesus. Turned back to the one who had the power to heal him. Turned back to the God of Israel to fall at his feet and pour out his thanks with all his heart. And in so doing, found the love of God waiting for him. And a cleansing that extended beyond a simple skin disorder, to his very soul.

The Bible is full of outcasts. And for a very good reason. Humanity is full of outcasts. In fact, humanity is the outcast. Cast out of the Garden of Eden. Cast out of the kingdom of heaven. Cast out from the love of God and the fellowship of His Spirit.

We come from a cursed people with a reputation for filling the earth with false gods. We are plagued with a disease called sin that infects our children from the moment they're conceived, disfigures us into an image we were never created to be, and always, always proves fatal to body and soul.

We are outcasts. But by faith, we are healed. By hearing the words of scripture and saying, "*This God will be my God,*" we are accepted into the family of God. By clinging in humility to the body and blood of Christ and thanking him for all that He has done, we hear Christ say to us, "*Rise and go. Your faith has made you well.*"

By receiving those means of God's grace that he offers us, by faith we are no longer outcasts. We no longer look in from the outside. We no longer blend into the sinfulness of humanity.

By the grace of God we are accepted and made whole. Like Ruth, we are made part of God's family. Purified of our sins so completely that even something as inherent to us as our original sin, which clings as closely to us as Ruth's Moabite heritage clung to her, is forgiven.

Like the Samaritan, we are invited into God's holy sanctuary. Even though we bore an incurable disease of uncleanness and unrighteousness that kept us out of His Kingdom, Christ has cured the incurable. He has made us to be His temple and priests of His Father forever.

You and I were born into our sinfulness. Born into exile. Born into a life apart from God. Outcasts from His Kingdom. But what Scripture proves time and time again is that God always finds a way to bring those on the outside into His love. Even if it means putting His own Son on the outside. Even if it means sending Him to the cross.

He who knew no sin has become sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God. He who was the only begotten Son of God was forsaken by his Father, that we might be called children of God. He who was faithful to the Father in all things was faithful also unto death, that we who were faithless might live and reign with him.

Whatever you were. Whatever you are. Whatever you thought you could be. You are more than that. Because, by the mercy of Christ Jesus, you will never again be an outsider to God's love. Amen.