

[1] September 15th, 2024

Sermon Title: Rudderless

Scripture: James 3:1-12

Theme: Living in the Neutral Zone of Transition

[2] What is the neutral zone in the process of transitioning to a new pastor? First of all, we should define some terms: “**Change** is not the same as transition. Change is situation: the new site, new boss, new team roles, new policy. **Transition** is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation. Change is external; transition is internal. Unless transition occurs change will not work.” So, having defined change and transition, what is the famous neutral zone? Loosely speaking, it is that zone between letting go of something and moving on to something else. The neutral zone is that space between the old reality and the new one. We might call it the land in-between lands; the land or space between borders, the zone without a flag. And it can be painful on the one hand, yet it can also provide an opportunity for extraordinary creativity, renewal and grace, on the other. So, welcome to the neutral zone! Hopefully, we are on the backend rather than the frontend. Summer vacation is over; the season of Fall awaits! The hope of Spring lies just beyond winter’s horizon. And the time will pass more quickly than we can imagine.

[3] Yet, even in the neutral zone, we are NOT as pilots who have NO rudder by which to steer the ship. (James 3:4) We are NOT rudderless. And yet, when tacking into the wind, to reach a destination in **the no-sail zone**, we do NOT want to oversteer using the rudder; we want to be subtle and precise while using it. We need to be more rudderless in our sailing, using the form of our ship instead, to guide us. It is an amazing discovery that sailboats can travel faster than the wind if its sail is pulled much tighter to the boat, its angle to the wind more acute, but if the angle is too sharp, the drag of the sailboat is too much and the sailboat will capsize in the wind. So, in a sense, as well as being more rudderless, we need also to keep a tight rein on the angle of the sail.

This lesson extends itself into our language and speech. When Jesus calms the storm on the sea with the words: “Peace, be still!” he is demonstrating an ancient principle. We are able to tame the capricious and fickle wind with a word spoken well and precisely! We are able to escape the limitations of our language, the broken boundaries of our thought, with the rudder of our tongue. Second Isaiah has given us the image of seasoned word, which acts as a rudder to the rudderless, a very present help in the season of our fatigue.

[4] “The Lord has given me a well-taught tongue, the tongue, the speech, the language (*lashon*) of a teacher, a disciple, the tongue of one who has been taught (*limmud*) that I may know how to sustain (*uth*) and speak, in season, a seasoned word (*dabar*) for the weary (*yaeph*), a word for one who is faint, fatigued, exhausted. Morning by morning God wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.” (Isaiah 50:4)

There is an old fable about a strange sea animal, called the ‘remora’ that would fasten itself to the

keel of the ship and, by some strange power, keep the boat stationary, like an anchor, even when the winds were filling all the sails. Is it perhaps true that some type of remora is holding us down in the center of our lake, keeping us at bay, keeping us from our destination, keeping us from sailing out of our neutral zone? Might this remora keep us from otherwise following Jesus? Might this remora keep us from either fully letting go or completely moving on? Might it keep us stuck on high center? How might we remove this legendary remora? Or better yet, use it to our advantage?

[5] While I was living in Austin and attending Shepherd of the Hills Christian Church, we had a group of church men who liked to volunteer their homebuilding services (carpentry, electricity, plumbing, masonry, laying tile, etc.) to Southwest Good Samaritan Ministries in the Rio Grande Valley. We would drive down for a few days of work and ministry, often inheriting projects that other church men had started but could not finish. And we might also leave projects for other church men to finish as well. Southwest Good Samaritan Ministries, headed by Rev. Feliberto Pereira, has numerous projects going on every year, and during the time I volunteered, these projects were cross-border projects, building tiny modular homes in northern Mexico, or delivering food and supplies to schools in this area. Or it might be building projects at the Refugee Center, or hands-on-projects to remodel or fix homes in southern Texas near Brownsville. There were sleeping quarters (several rooms) attached to Iglesia Cristiana Ebenezer (Ebenezer Christian Church) in Los Fresnos, Texas, where Feliberto was pastor, as well as at the Refugee Center named “Compassion.” SWGSM is one of the official ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada. Having given you some background for this ministry, it is important to recognize that this ministry not only is a cross-border ministry, but that it also serves people who are living in-between the two nations of Mexico and the United States, native islanders that do not belong to either country, who make their living along the mouth of the Rio Grande River, or along the coastal waterways where the river empties into the gulf. The Rice and Beans ministry has been largely developed to serve the needs of these in-between peoples living in the neutral zone along the border. And yet, not neutral for them. Truly, they are ones crossed by the border, rather than the other way around, their ancestors having lived in this space for centuries. Theirs is a neutral zone NOT of their own making or even their own awareness; they are those who have been made poor by circumstances beyond their control. They are fishermen, but their fishing no longer sustains them. SWGSM is helping to feed them with the Rice and Beans ministry, young Disciples volunteering to re-bag the rice and beans from larger sacks into smaller family-size bags for delivery. When we help people out of their neutral zone, we are raising the flag of compassion over our own neutral zones.

[6] Jesus had such a ministry as well, although we sometimes miss it when we read the Gospels. This ministry is recorded in Luke 17:11-19:

‘Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus *traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee*. NIV [Jesus was going *through the region between Samaria and Galilee*. NRSV].

In the original Greek language, Jesus is “passing through the middle ground between Samaria and Galilee.” I believe Jesus chose this middle ground intentionally. Jesus is seeking out the usually invisible people along the border who have no country or status. He was traveling into regions where those with leprosy were assigned to live, through a region where those we fear the most are placed, places where those with contagious diseases or severe afflictions are sent to live out their days.

And who should he encounter there, but ten ‘leprous men,’ begging him to restore their health, give them a second chance at life, a renewed hope for the future. [Note that the original Greek language suggests that diseases or illness do not define us. We are human beings first and foremost, not diseased or ill.] ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’ With these words, the ‘ten’ were not just asking to be restored to physical health, but to be restored into the community that had excluded them. Just a bit of biblical background here. First century leprosy was not the same as what is called Hansen’s disease today, although it may well have been a disease of the skin. Numbers 5:2-3 commands that lepers be put out of the camp; Leviticus 13:46 adds that lepers “should wear torn clothes, let the hair of the head hang loose, and cry ‘Unclean, unclean’ when anyone approached. For anyone healed of leprosy, that person must present themselves to the priest and undergo ritualized procedures before they could return to the camp (Lev. 13:49).

No doubt the priests of that region knew each one of these in-between people by name and by sight. Perhaps they were the officials who helped assigned them to these out-of-the-way places, declaring them unclean so that they could be exiled to the proverbial land of Nod. It may not be so far-fetched to think that Jesus is having some fun with these officious priests when he says: “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And, as soon as he speaks, and they begin to move away, Jesus heals them on the spot, while they are walking away to find the priests and obey his command. “Ah,” we might say, “you never expected to see these people again, did you? But here they are! You had written them off, erased their memory, as they crossed over into the land of the forgotten. The ten lepers that Jesus encounters and heals in the border lands are now like ghosts from the past, faces from the cloud of unknowing, hungry mouths seeking shelter and a meal from the public managers of belief, standing in dis-belief.

[7] Luke suggests that this story of the in-between people is a story about gratitude more than a lesson on inclusion. Only one of the ten, turns around in mid-stride, and returns to thank Jesus for being healed. He not only gives gratitude, but does so in an elaborately, demonstrably, humble way falling flat on the floor at the feet of Jesus and with a loud voice, offering immense praises to the King of kings. His middle name is gratitude. His attitude is gratitude! **He is not only a Good Samaritan, but a seriously thankful Samaritan.** Jesus asks him, ‘where are the other nine of you?’ Why are you the only one of the ten who returned to thank me? What started out possibly as a prank on the priests is, all of a sudden, a very serious ministry to those isolated from community and made poor by neutral systems that hide our fears.

[8] The great reformer of Germany, Martin Luther, once described the nature of true worship before God as “the tenth leper turning back.” Indeed, ‘thanksgiving’ is one of the most powerful responses we can make to any of our worldly challenges. And I would add, that gratitude is also one of the more powerful emotions we have, freeing us from fear, releasing us from anxiety, emboldening us to do more and dare more than we have ever imagined. The Thankful Samaritan was more than just a healed foreigner. Now also a beautiful child of God, whole and accepted and blessed and free. In a world that seems intent on NOT being thankful or grateful, NOT being forgiving or merciful, NOT being gracious or compassionate, it is significant that remember the tenth one,’ the Thankful Samaritan!

So, coming back around to the neutral zone of our transition, how do we apply gratitude to our neutrality? How do we raise the flag of compassion over our own neutral zone? How do we remove our ship’s remora that hold us back from moving on? How do we expand the neutral zones of our thinking so that those who have been displaced, those who have been crossed by the border, whatever that border might be, whoever are the least of these, may be included in our future? And borders are of various types, such as losing a home or a job, a loved-one, or a minister or ministry, losing our status, or our security? Whatever such border crosses us, we are no longer invisible, no longer surrounded by isolation or loneliness, no longer squeezed in-between a rock and a hard place, no longer defined by measures outside our control, but defined by the gratitude of love, grace and wonder in Christ Jesus, Our Savior.

No one knows for sure! But, Jesus may have crossed the boundary between Samaria and Galilee several times in the course of his journey along the border. Indeed, it seems likely. We do not know on which side of the border the village was located or why the ten called him ‘Master,’ a term usually reserved for disciples to use. Yes, we must keep the very appropriate boundaries that we establish to protect our lives and families. But, as Jesus teaches us, false boundaries that restrict our growth and health must be crossed, perhaps more than once, and the neutral zones, the no-sail zones, navigated with a light hand on the rudder. And, this is the way WOCC will successfully navigate our own neutral zone in seeking a new pastor.

We are called beyond being leprous or clean, being Samaritan or Jew, male or female, trans or cisgender, slave or free, being lost or found, conservative or liberal, believers or non-believers. No one is beyond God’s mercy! May it always be so! Alleluia! Amen.