

“Building Upon Our Heritage”

By Rev. Damaris D. Whittaker
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Let us pray:

As we celebrate our 381 year anniversary, I conclude the sermon series highlighting our Guiding Principles with one that is appropriate for this occasion:

“Building upon our heritage.”

For those who are new to us, our Guiding Principles are very beautifully displayed in this Meeting House, reminding us every time we enter it of our commitment to welcome God’s presence, serve the City and build upon, and honor, our history.

I have spent some time in the last weeks reading about Thomas Hooker, and I found a great quote that I would be remiss if I do not share it with you. Thomas Hooker had a sizar (intern) who helped him when he was going through a crisis. His name was Simeon Ashe. When Simeon was going to preach his first sermon, Thomas said to him, “Sym, let it be hot.” He meant zealous.¹

It is apparent to me that Thomas Hooker was not a boring preacher!

In the Gospel Lesson this morning, we have heard the story of Jesus healing ten lepers.

Jesus, finds himself in between Samaria and Galilee—“a borderland.” He is on his way to Jerusalem, and while he is crossing physical borders, he is also crossing social borders.

He heals ten lepers, one of them arguably, doubly marginalized, because he was not only a leper, but he was Samaritan. Samaritans were considered enemies and outsiders.

Nonetheless, it is the Samaritan who returns to thank Jesus for his healing.

¹ George Williams, et al. *Harvard Theological Studies XXVIII, Thomas Hooker: Writings in England and Holland, 1626-1633*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, pg 3.

So, in the heart of the story is location. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, where his ultimate destination is the cross. He is at a border, not only geographically, but at a place where ethnic and religious differences are overt. He is where “the other” is present.

At the heart of the story, there are also ten men who lived in “no-man’s land,” being considered, social, religious outcasts, and physically unclean.

At the heart of the story, there is healing and gratitude and faith. Jesus says to the Samaritan, “Your faith has made you well.” The Greek word “sesoken” is used here and can be translated: “healed, made well, saved.”

But at the heart of the story, there is also the acknowledgement on the part of the Samaritan that he has been transformed.

He recognizes the person of Jesus; his deed and power.

He recognizes that there is something to be thankful for,

He recognizes that this event requires that he stop, change direction, and return to the source of his miracle.

At the heart of the story, there is the presence of the foreigner: the stranger; the one who is different from the rest.

When Parker Palmer speaks about the realities of our discomfort with the other, “the stranger,” he says, “Tired of the differences between cultures, of the threatening pretensions of cultures alien to your own? There is a military, economic, or political intervention that promises to make them just like us.”²

The reality is that this great church was founded by people who were considered to be “the other.” People who disagreed theologically and decided to “live between regions” to build their homes and their church in “no-man’s” land - people who were strong in their faith and convictions. Thomas Hooker writes in his sermon *The Carnal Hypocrite*, “If grace be inwardly, it will show outwardly.”

² Parker J. Palmer, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring*, San Francisco: Harper & Row 1990, pg 70.

Now we are the “The First Church of Christ.” It almost feels like we are no longer the other. We are a mainline church—a founding church.

But, do we find ourselves, in this 381st anniversary, in a boundary land? If so -- if we are in an “in-between region” -- it would serve us well to recognize the foreigner and the stranger.

It would serve us well to stop and acknowledge the great blessings that we have received.

It would serve us well to rejoice, to live in the moment, and experience God’s blessing so palpably profound that we turn to God, the source of our blessing.

And as we “build upon our heritage,” not only do we acknowledge the great accomplishments of those who came before us, but we imitate their faith and spirit. We take to heart the words of Thomas Hooker when he said,

*“If you desire any evidence to your souls
or testimony to your heart that God has wrought grace in you,
then show it in your lives.”*

Amen.