

Last week, we looked at one of the hardest passages in scripture. Psalm 137 was tough. That was the awful place Jeremiah tried to warn people of. But they didn't listen, and they ended up there anyway. So, Jeremiah pivots. He's already told the folks that got left behind to go ahead and buy houses, plant seeds, mourn but survive. And then he looks to the ones crying out in the wilderness and gives them a different directive. He tells them to survive, too, but instead of preserving the purity of the people, just survive. Make that strange place your home. Eat what grows in foreign soil. Marry who you can, have children and grandchildren. Seek the welfare of the place you live, wherever that ends up being. In other words, set aside the rules you've always lived by and just survive.

That's great and all, but it's also the source of what'll become a long-lasting division. Years later, when the exiles return to the Promised Land, they meet the ones who got left behind, and it's not the hopeful homecoming you might expect. See, the exiles listened to Jeremiah, and they loosened the rules in order to survive. But the ones left behind not only kept the rules, they kept 'em more strictly than before. One group was lax and the other wasn't. So, when they came back together, there was a lot of friction. But there were more returning exiles than folks left behind, and in time, the returning exiles won out. The others remained but were forced into second-class citizen status with effectively a different religion. Silly me, I almost forgot to tell y'all the name of the ones left behind! They're the Samaritans of Good Samaritan fame. And this one little passage from Jeremiah's where that division starts. They could've embraced each other, but instead of a joyful reunion, it's full of resentment. One side resentful that the other didn't have to leave, the other that God's Law could be so flippantly discarded. That's not a fair assessment of what either side faced, but fairness wasn't really in the air.

There's a similar story in early Christianity. The Romans were weirdly accepting of different religions. They didn't care what you believed so long as you paid your taxes and swore allegiance to their gods. So, when the Romans came to town, most Christians kinda crossed their fingers and went along with what the Romans wanted to hear, and they were allowed to live. But some refused to swear allegiance to any god but the Christian God, and for that, many of them were executed on the spot. This created a rift. One side said it wasn't really a lie to go along with the Romans 'cause they were under duress, but the more strict side didn't see it that way. They said that, if you were baptized by a priest who crossed their fingers, it didn't count. If the ministers weren't absolutely pure, nothing they did carried the weight of a sacrament. So, if you received a sacrament from a finger-crossing minister, you'd just have to be baptised again. Those hardliners were called Donatists, and eventually, they lost the argument. The generosity of history saw the need to survive as more important than the need for purity. We get a line in the Creed out of this, by the way: "We acknowledge one baptism." We say that every week as a reminder that hardline legalism isn't what we're about.

Ya know, whether we're talking about Samaritans or Donatists, it strikes me that we follow a lot of rule breakers. Even God breaks the rules of the universe; we call those miracles. Jeremiah was arrested several times, Paul, too. Jesus famously got arrested. Even the biggest holidays centered on Jesus break rules, like how birth and death are supposed to work. Moses killed a man. David unseated a king he swore to follow. Joseph's prophetic gift was discovered in jail. The Book of Acts has got a prison break led by an angel. Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Joan of Arc, Thomas Cranmer...y'all, our heroes are prisoners. Unjustly imprisoned, mostly, but prisoners nonetheless. It doesn't matter if *we* think they're criminals; the state did. This goes beyond the religious, too. Take Robin Hood or Thelma and Louise, Butch and Sundance, Cool Hand Luke, Peter Quill,

the Count of Monte Cristo -- all prisoners, all criminals, all heroes. It's a curious thing that we tout law and order and heroicize criminals at the same time, but we do.

But back to scripture. When Jesus does his healing in the region between Samaria and Galilee, things get weird. Geographically speaking, there is no in-between. Samaria and Galilee share a border, but somewhere in that place, a bunch of lepers meet Jesus and get healed. But only one, explicitly said to be a foreigner, only one thanked him. Somewhere in the middle of the division between Samaritans and Jews, a miracle happened. But Jesus doesn't say "believe in me and be healed." He just sends them on their way healed. And remember, we're talking about two peoples separated by a rift so deep they've become different religions, but Jesus doesn't tell them to go to the Jewish priests or confess Yahweh or recognize him as the Messiah. He just says, "go and show yourself to the priests," just as likely Samaritan priests as Jewish priests. He also says, "your faith has made you well." Not THE faith, not OUR faith, but YOUR faith. Maybe he doesn't care about their religious persuasion; maybe he just sees people in need of help.

These days, we're seeing some of those old kinds of divisions coming back. We've got what the law says, we've got what people actually do, and we've got what puts humanity first. And while the Robin Hoods of our faith are heroic in their disobedience, we gotta be careful 'cause not every lawbreaker's a hero. But historically, hardline legalism fails when ideologies that put humanity first rise. It's not always easy to see, but generosity and compassion're far stronger than punitive legalism could ever hope to be. I'm not telling y'all to go out and get arrested, but I am saying, when you're trying to figure out what to do, look for what promotes justice and dignity. It may be legal, it may not. What matters is if it's right. We don't look to the powerful for guidance on this one. Our lot's with the growing poor, the hungry, the imprisoned. Children, widows, and yes, explicitly, foreigners are who we serve. We were never meant to be hardliners when it came to the rulebook; we're meant to be hardliners when it comes to compassion. Remember who we are, and I don't mean remember who we've been for the past ten, twenty, or a hundred years. Remember who we're meant to've been for the past two thousand years. Christianities that embraced punitive legalism brought us Crusades, Inquisitions, and Holocausts. Christianities that embraced the love of God brought us martyrs, witnesses, and saints. We get to choose, right now, everyday, we get to choose between legalism and compassion, punishment and hope, law and love. And that path of compassion, hope, and love might land us in the ranks of the criminals and martyrs of this world, but if that's where we must land, then there we will land. With the saints. With Jesus himself. And with our God.