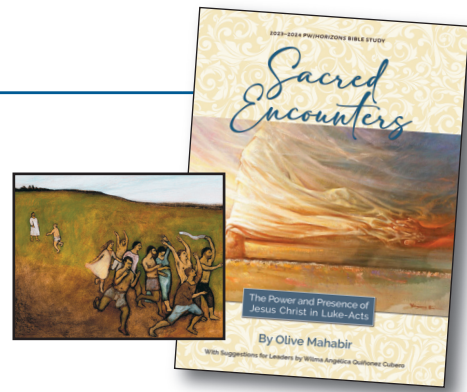


Belonging

BY REV. SUSAN CARTER WIGGINS

For use with Lesson Five of the 2023–2024 PW/*Horizons* Bible study, *Sacred Encounters: The Power and Presence of Jesus Christ in Luke-Acts*, by Olive Mahabir



Scripture: Luke 17:11–21

In William Shakespeare’s tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*, the conflict between the Montagues and the Capulets is similar to the feud between two real-life American families—the Hatfields and the McCoys. In both cases, family members were taught to hate one another simply because they belonged to the opposing clan.

Once upon a time in the ancient Near East, Israel was all one big “happy family” . . . until it wasn’t. In 1 Kings 12, we learn how Israel came to be divided into two kingdoms—the Northern Kingdom (Israel) with its capital city in Samaria, and the Southern Kingdom (Judah) with its capital city in Jerusalem. After the division, Israel’s King Jeroboam changed the practice of the Northern Kingdom, whereby they no longer traveled to the Temple in Jerusalem to make offerings and sacrifices, but instead worshiped idols in Dan and Bethel (12:25–33). Eventually they also intermarried with Assyrians, which further divided the ideologies and theologies between the peoples of the two kingdoms (Deut. 12:5–14). From that point forward, Jews (Southern Kingdom) and Samaritans (Northern Kingdom) regarded one another with great animosity.

Enter Jesus.

God Incarnate repeatedly uses the presence of a person from Samaria to demonstrate God’s calling on the lives of all who claim to follow him and his teachings. Why? If Jesus can point to a Samaritan—of all people—as one who listens to him, follows his ways, and/or cares for another person, then surely Jesus’ followers can “go and do likewise.” That is Jesus’ command after he tells the parable of the Good Samaritan who tenderly cares for a man who has been beaten and left for

dead along a road (Lk. 10:25–37). Jesus describes Samaritans as “foreigners” so that all those listening and observing will understand his deeper message about radical love and care. This teaching appears repeatedly in the Hebrew Scriptures, and would already be familiar to those hearing Jesus’ teachings. For example, Leviticus 19:34 says, “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

A marriage means more than two individuals marrying. It means new ways of doing things for the couple and perhaps also the newlyweds’ families. Sometimes the joining of two lives causes conflict among the couple’s parents and even their grandparents. Has your family ever experienced such conflict?

Hospitality to strangers is a hallmark command from God, reiterated by Jesus: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mk. 12:31; Matt. 22:39; Lk. 10:27).

Jesus’ repeated lessons about the foreigner in our midst may cause us to think, “Where is the stranger among us?” Or “Where do I need to go (including and especially out of my comfort zone) to meet those who name their homeland as far away from mine?” Where might you go and what might you do to extend the same hospitality as Jesus?

In this lesson’s narrative (Lk. 17:11–21), of the ten individuals with leprosy who come before Jesus seeking healing, only one person, after being healed of his malady, gives thanks to God. That one man prostrates himself before Jesus, thanks him and praises God. And this man is a Samaritan, a “foreigner” (v. 15–16). From the historic Jewish perspective of Samaritans, a Samaritan is the least likely person to do what this man did! And yet, he’s the very one of the ten to recognize God in Jesus and offer thanks and praise. All the people are healed, because that’s who Jesus is—the Son of God who practices such radical inclusivity and hospitality that he welcomes everyone into God’s embrace. And that welcome includes even those Samaritans who have been historically hated by Jesus’ own people.

In the *Book of Order: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part II*, the Great Ends of the Church (F-1.0304) are a part of the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity (governance). One of these six foundational principals, or purposes, of why we are the church is “the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.” This is but one aspect of who we are called to be, and it is exactly what Jesus does time and time again during his three-year ministry on earth, and that his followers carry forth thereafter. Jesus shows the world what the Kingdom of Heaven will be like with everyone—yes, everyone—welcome. Jesus goes even further in his teachings time and again, and in this narrative, too, saying, “For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you” (v. 21).

Among us? Us? Now? Where?

Where do we twenty-first century followers of Jesus experience the Kingdom of Heaven, the gathering of people from east and west, north and south? Is it in places created to offer hospitality and welcome? Our sanctuaries? Our schools? Boardrooms? Coffeeshops? Describe the places you

best experience people of many cultures, ethnicities and languages coming together.

If we are (and by the way, we are) those now called to carry forth Jesus’ teachings about what the Kingdom of Heaven will be like, where do and how can we do better in welcoming strangers into our midst and into our communities—most especially our communities of faith?

Recently, I was watching the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) program *Finding Your Roots with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.*, and the person discovering their ancestry commented something akin to “If all Americans would recognize that each and every one of our ancestors came to this country from another country, whether by choice or by force; if we would all stop and realize that we are all from somewhere else, and that our ancestors were all strangers in a strange land when they first set foot onto the soil of this country, then we could all accept one another.”

That would be the day that we would come to experience “the kingdom of God among us.”

And, it might just be a Samaritan who leads us.

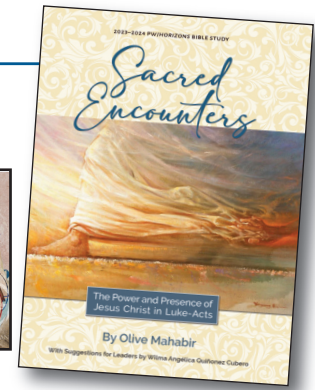
May it be so, one day. May it be so.

Rev. Susan Carter Wiggins serves as associate pastor for congregational care and nurture at Germantown Presbyterian in Memphis, Tennessee. She is the daughter and granddaughter of Presbyterian Women leaders.

Sharing the Healing Power of Jesus

BY REV. SUSAN CARTER WIGGINS

For use with Lesson Six of the 2023–2024 PW/Horizons Bible study, *Sacred Encounters: The Power and Presence of Jesus Christ in Luke-Acts*, by Olive Mahabir



Scripture: Acts 3:1–10

In Acts 3, we learn of a man who has been unable to walk his entire life. Each day, people carried him and laid him at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, where he would hold out his hands begging for coins to be tossed his way. He was a man who, from his mother's womb, has carried his wound.

Worshippers came each day, just as they were, each one carrying their own wounds of grief, loneliness or sickness. Perhaps they masked their wounds with smiles and pleasant greetings. When asked, "How are you today?" they answered, "Fine; I'm fine. And you?" Or perhaps they whispered truth to friends. And, on they went, into their place of worship.

What wounds do you carry with you into worship?

Do you mask your wounds? Or do you dare show your vulnerability and answer honestly?

This man's wounds were obvious to all entering through the Beautiful Gate. He could not mask or hide them. As far as we know, his only means of livelihood was begging for alms—the gifts of monies—as people made their way into the temple.

What would it be like for you to see someone sit at the entrance of your place of worship each and every Sunday morning, holding out their hands in hopes of your monetary kindness?

What would you do?

This story causes me to think about the men (and sometimes women) who stand on the corners between my home and the church. They, too, hold out their hands in hopes of monetary kindness from all drivers who pass near to them. Perhaps these are my "man at the Beautiful Gate." I cannot miss them; I cannot overlook them; I cannot drive past them without giving what I can to them.

The man was in the same place each day—right at the Beautiful Gate of the temple—in plain sight of all those coming for worship. They had no choice but to see him each and every day. They could not miss him. They could not overlook him. At least some people gave what they could to him. This is why he came each day and he was able to subsist. If we keep reading his narrative in Acts 3–4, we learn that he was more than 40 years old (4:22), which causes us to assume that he had no trade, no other means to subsist in the world. He

stayed with Peter and John for a while, but we cannot help but wonder, “What became of him once he was healed?” His life had just been transformed by the power of healing from the Holy Spirit and he went about jumping with joy, leaping and praising God (v. 8). I can imagine that he stayed with the disciples for a while longer, learning what they learned and doing what they were doing—that is, sharing the good news of the healing power of Jesus all throughout the region.

What do you imagine the man did the day after he was healed by Peter? Where did he go? What did he do?

This was Peter’s very first healing. He and John knew people were watching them. The man didn’t ask to be healed—he asked for money. But Peter sensed another possibility, and looking directly into the man’s eyes, he asked that the man look back at him with the same intensity, and the man did. When their eyes locked, Peter knew healing power of the Holy Spirit had left him and gone into the man—just as Jesus knew his healing power had left him and gone into the woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years (Matt. 9:20–22; Mark 5:25–34; Lk. 8:43–48). Peter reached out his hand and lifted the man from the ground, and the man stood for the first time in his whole forty-something life.

When was a time you felt the intensity of locking eyes with another person, and felt the intimacy of connection?

In that moment, did you sense that your life had been transformed in some way through the new and powerful connection you’d just made? What emotion did you feel? What was the very next thing you did?

The man at the Beautiful Gate had friends—good friends—who carried him there each and every day.

Who are your friends that would carry you each day to where you need to go?

For whom are you such a friend as these?

Friends. Intimate connections. Healing. Watching. Amazement. It’s all there in these powerful few verses in Acts 3.

Peter and John preached and taught the good news of Jesus’ healing power. For doing so, they were arrested (4:3). But more importantly, for doing so 5,000 new believers joined them (4:4)!

In his day, Jesus was seen and watched. In their day, Peter and John, and all Jesus’ disciples, were seen and watched. Those who watched were amazed, and then, they believed.

In our day, it is us who are seen and watched. It is us who must be the hands and feet, the voice and the very presence of Jesus, for all the world to see and watch. Those who watch will be amazed and then, they too, will believe.

Wherever we are, God has placed us there and intends to do something in and through us. May we share the healing power of Jesus with those we encounter. Amen.

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