

October 12, 2025
Proper 23-C
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c

Psalms 111

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Luke 17:11-19

In the Name of the One, Holy and Living God. Amen.

In this morning's Gospel reading, Luke tells us that Jesus is somewhere *between Samaria and Galilee*. Between. Neither in Samaria nor in Galilee. I think the only place more frightening than an actual border is that liminal place in between, where boundaries are blurry. At the same time, and certainly in Luke's Gospel, it is precisely in these in-between places, places where the boundaries you and I manufacture don't matter at all, it's there that God is busy at work.

In Jesus's day, the animosity between Jews and Samaritans was already old and entrenched. The history of their divisions is difficult to unravel – not even Wikipedia is of much help. Suffice it to say that the two groups grew apart at some point, and now disagreed about most everything that mattered: how to interpret scripture or where to worship God.

Christian tradition has tended to view Samaritans as outcasts but, as they had their own communities and institutions, it is unlikely that they were much interested in being included by Jewish Galileans. There is little doubt that the two communities lived (and live) in considerable tension. But to render the Samaritans simply as the objects of Jewish (and Christian) contempt lacks respect – and continues to infect our current rhetoric about the Middle East.

Luke tells us that Jesus is in the borderlands, going through the region between Samaria and Galilee, on the margins of both. And this borderland, like many, was inhabited by those whose bodies were not welcomed in either world – an impossible community of unbelonging.

The ten lepers in today's story live in the shadows, another kind in-between place, another borderland. They call out to Jesus across a line, the distance prescribed by the Law. Their various skin maladies rendered them ritually unclean, barring them from participating in Temple services; forcing them to stand far outside the borders of their own community. They don't approach Jesus, for they know their place; and they know their people: other outcasts, united in their suffering and their exclusion from the wider, fearful community.

In those days, neither religion nor government helped unfortunate folks afflicted with skin diseases. They lived as beggars, announcing their affliction by shouting out *Unclean! Unclean!* as a warning, so that even those who would be charitable would keep a safe distance. (You may remember that heart-breaking scene from the movie, *Ben-Hur*, where the lepers lived in grim caves, isolated from their families and the rest of society.)

This time, instead of shouting, *Unclean!* the ten called out, *Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!* And, in a parallel to the first reading, where Elisha tells Naaman the leper to do something simple, to go and wash in the Jordan, Jesus tells these ten to do something simple – to go and show themselves to the priests. And, as they did so, they were made clean. The going comes first, followed by the healing.

Let's pause for a moment to be amazed at what is happening here. When Jesus heals their leprosy, he doesn't merely cure their bodies, he restores their identities. They can now safely return to family and community, to companionship and intimacy, all those things that make us fully human.

When he heals their withered skin and numbed limbs, he releases them to reclaim all the social and spiritual ties that their disease had stolen from them. To put it another way, while traveling between Samaria and Galilee, Jesus enters a no-man's-land — a land of no belonging — and invites ten exiles home.

Then, one...only one...a Samaritan, turned around to go back to Jesus to express his gratitude. Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

It is tempting to reduce this passage to a story about nine people with bad manners, nine ingrates. But the text doesn't tell us anything about ingratitude. Who is to say that they did not all rejoice to see their symptoms disappear? Who knows what went through their minds? Surprise? Relief? Maybe there were even prayers of thanksgiving.

What distinguishes the one who went back to Jesus is the fact that he returned to the one responsible for the blessing and expressed his gratitude. He returned "to give praise to God." Jesus does not seem to focus much on the "failings" of the nine. Instead, he pronounces an extra blessing on the one, the foreigner, the Samaritan, who could not have gone to the Jerusalem Temple in the first place. He tells him his faith has made him well.

Now, here is one of those places in scripture where something might get lost in translation. Cleansed, healed, saved, made well. To us, these might seem just synonyms, but the Greek of Luke's gospel suggests a bit more.

That final word in the passage could be translated as “made whole.” Made whole. All ten followed Jesus’s directions. All ten were cleansed and healed. The one who returned, expressing gratitude, was cleansed, and healed, and made whole.

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A story about the healing of ten lepers in ancient Palestine may seem remote to many of us. But a story about God’s healing “those” people in “those” places is as current as today’s news. This is the meta-message of Luke’s gospel – that God was constantly at work in places where God had no business being, turning our expectations upside down.

People all around us are caught in those scary in-between places, like the one between Samaria and Galilee. The borderlands that surround us have many origins: illness, poverty, addiction. Betrayals between nations. Betrayals between people. Queer folk whose lived experience doesn’t map onto societal norms. People just needing something, anything, to believe in. Something to hold onto.

For people in those places, life can be nearly impossible. Yet borderlands are places where life goes on, sometimes in unthinkable conditions. Luke insists that Jesus stands in all of these places, doing God’s work.

An old English proverb says that “necessity is the mother of invention,” and I marvel daily at the inventiveness of the unhoused population of this neighborhood. At the same time, I confess to a dim and unredeemed voice from my childhood that still tsks and wonders, “why can’t they be neat?”

Recently, I learned that the Hebrew word for compassion (רַחֵם rachem) shares a root with the word for womb (רֶחֶם rechem). For us, then, the necessity of others could be the womb of compassion – the deep awareness of the needs of another person.

Of course, food, clothing and shelter are often pressing and immediate needs, but there is a sort of deep awareness that requires presence and listening. To be ok with stepping into a place where you don’t know the rules, where what you know has to be set aside as you listen to stories that can break your heart, or make it leap with joy.

You may not be able to fix, or control, anything. But you can be present to another’s agony or, sometimes, to their joy. And in that presence, God will be present. In those moments, Anne Lamott’s three essential prayers happen all at the same time: Help, Thanks, and Wow.

This parish lives, both literally and spiritually, within many borderlands – of race, sexuality, gender identity, wealth and healthcare disparities, and many more. And in these days of hate-filled political and social movements, more and more people find

themselves trying to survive in borderlands where no one seems to see them or want them.

And yet, the Central West End is where God has planted us to be the hands of Christ in the world. For decades, you have been faithful in stewarding the resources God has given you to be a beacon of hope in dark times. That calling shows no signs of going away in the near future, for which we should give God thanks and praise, because that light which we are called to keep burning shines in places we cannot always see.

Here's a story about that. December 1st of last year was my first Sunday with you here in St. Louis. On that very day, a young couple visited Trinity, because they had been looking for a church that lived out its calling the way that you all have for decades. After church that morning, they approached me with what they considered an odd request. One of them is Hindu, the other Christian. They wanted to be married in a double ceremony, and would I celebrate the Christian part of the service for them.

Since I'm telling you this story, you know that my answer was yes. On Friday, months of listening to stories about them and their compassion for the world culminated in a joyful day of the Christian wedding in the morning, and a much more elaborate Hindu wedding in the evening – where I didn't know the language (Sanskrit) or the rituals, but the point of human love was abundantly clear. It wasn't less Hindu or less Christian – it was more of both!

Just thinking about it brings tears to my eyes. This couple and their huge hearts had gathered an enormous family, both of origin and of choice: interreligious, intercultural, intergenerational, gay and straight, cis and trans – all celebrating God's love in a place where many in this country would say God had no business being.

The point of the story is that I got to witness this incredible vision of God's love because they got to know who you are. I just happened to walk in the door that day. So, thanks and wow to you.

There is nowhere that God is not. God is not only in the borderlands, but God is always in the borderlands, so let us continue to seek God in all the places God calls us. And let us give thanks for the work we are called to do in Christ's name.

To paraphrase George Herbert (from his poem "Gratefulnesse"),

Thou that hast giv'n so much to us,
Give one thing more, a gratefull heart.

Amen.