

Returning to give praise

Luke 17:11-19 (October 9, 2022)

by Paul Matheson



Have you ever felt like an outsider? Can you recall a time when you were isolated from the crowd? Your first day of school, perhaps. You show up in this brand new place, with all these other people. How do you fit in?

You're invited to a friend's home for a meal, and their family's there with them. They already share a bond. They know the inside jokes, the unwritten expectations. But you don't. You're not part of that family system.

You come to church on Sunday morning. You look around and see others chatting in the foyer. They seem friendly enough – at least, with each other. But you don't have a clue who these people are. You wonder what will happen in the service today. You've never been to a Mennonite church before.

We've all felt like an outsider at some time in our lives. I remember travelling to Chicago for a course I was taking. My flight had been delayed, so I was very late arriving. I'd missed the welcome reception when I would get to meet my colleagues. Now the taxi dropped me off on the campus of a strange university, in the dark. The dorm building was locked. How would I get to my room? Where was I supposed to go the next morning? I could feel my anxiety level rising!



Do you ever feel like an *outsider*? Like you don't quite belong?

In our scripture reading today, Jesus travels through the region between Samaria and Galilee. This is a borderland, an undefined area between two districts, a long way from the centre of cultural and religious life in Jerusalem.

Jesus is “out there” in a space that is ill-defined and distant from the mainstream. As he travels through that liminal space he comes to an unnamed village. And in that village he encounters a group of lepers. Jesus is among outsiders.



Leprosy was a term that applied to a wide range of skin conditions, some of which could be quite disfiguring. If left untreated, it can cause permanent damage to a person's nerves, skin, eyes, and limbs.

The response to this was social isolation. Have a look at this instruction from the book of Leviticus. The commandment emphasizes that the person shall live apart from the community, *outside* the camp.

“The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ ... He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.” (Leviticus 13:45-46)



B.jehle,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Leprosy_deformities_hands.jpg

That may seem like a cruel command, but it was the best way they had to prevent the disease from spreading. And this practice was maintained throughout the world, until fairly recently.



Photo by Richard Croft, Holy Trinity Church, File:Leper window - geograph.org.uk - 817308.jpg - Wikimedia Commons

Here is a picture of a “leper window” in a medieval church. People who were ill could peek through that window and listen to what was going on in the service. But they were not allowed to enter. They were very much outsiders, even in the house of God.



Here's another thing we need to say about this story: The key figure, the one who stands apart from all the rest, was a Samaritan. These were the descendants of the ancient northern tribes of Israel, the first to go into exile when the Assyrian Empire invaded. For centuries, they were cut off from their neighbours. As a result, their traditions developed independently.

You're probably aware of the stigma attached to Samaritans in Jesus' time. This is one of several stories that portray Jesus associating with those shunned by the religiously “pure”.

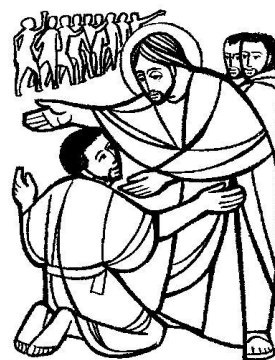
What we're dealing with here is very much an outsider: A Samaritan within a group of lepers, whom Jesus meets in an undefined region. I wonder, who would this sort of person be today? Can you imagine? A person without status or acceptance in the community.



There are ten lepers. They stand at a distance and call out for help. “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” He tells them to go and show themselves to the priests. Priests acted like public health officials who were empowered to declare the lepers “clean.”

Off they went. And in the going they were healed! Nine of those lepers kept going. But *one* of them turned back. Can you guess which one it was?

The Samaritan turns around and praises God with a loud voice. Then he runs to Jesus, falls at his feet and says, “Thank you!” He is so full of gratitude, he cannot keep it to himself. It must be embodied. His thanksgiving must be vocalized.



If he was a chorister he'd be singing the Hallelujah Chorus. If he was a gymnast he'd be turning cartwheels. If he was a little child he'd be squealing with delight. As it is, he falls at the feet of the One who has healed him. Falls right down in an act of unabashed devotion.



“But weren't there ten of you?” asks Jesus. “Where are the other nine?” Where indeed! “Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”



Photo by M.t.lifshits,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Model_of_Jerusalem_in_the_Late_Second_Temple_Period.JPG

And that word “*foreigner*” says it all. It’s the only time this particular word is used in the New Testament. It’s the word that hung in the temple, separating the outer court of the Gentiles from the inner court where Jewish men could be. It separated the ritually clean from the unclean.¹

As a Samaritan, this man was excluded from institutional worship. But he is certainly not excluded from the presence of God in Jesus!



What was he thankful for? Was it his physical healing? Yes, I’m sure it was! But there is also something more. All ten lepers were healed, but only this one returned. The rest carried on their merry way to the temple, where each of them would be examined, and each would be declared “clean”. But not this one.

Turning back to Jesus, he falls at the feet of One who has power to break his isolation and reconnect him with his community. Connection, community, loving relationship – these things are central to the reign of God! They are every bit as important for this man’s healing – and for our healing – as the cure of his disease.

From this moment on he will no longer live apart from others. He will go back to his village, return to his family, rejoin his neighbours. He will be *re-integrated* into life. He’s discovered God’s saving grace. God’s loving acceptance of him, even him, as a human being.



If the kingdom of God has come near in the person of Jesus, then clearly that kingdom has room for the likes of this Samaritan. The temple may lock him out, but not God!

The kingdom draws all sorts of people first and foremost into loving relationship with their creator. And then into relationship with others too!

At the heart of life, there is a love that reaches out and seeks to embrace every one of us, breaking that terrible sense of isolation and loneliness that plagues our human lives.

There is a light that shines in the darkness of our night. There is a spark that will not be extinguished! It glows like a bright morning star in the vast loneliness of the universe. There is a voice that calls to us saying, “You are not alone! You are beloved. You are mine.” Have you heard this voice? Has it spoken to you?



When I read this story, I see two pictures – two snapshots of life. One is before the man’s healing, and the other comes after.

¹ Chelsey Harmon, <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2022-10-03/luke-1711-19-3/>, Accessed October 3, 2022.

I'm grateful for life itself. For the wonder of our world, even with its many problems.

Like that leper in our story, I give thanks for health and healing. But like him also, I give thanks for something more: For that which is central to all life. For a *love* that embraces us and will never let us go. Thanks for things, yes. But thanks even more for the love of our Creator!



There's one last word Jesus says at the very end of our story. He tells the Samaritan leper, now healed, to get up and go on his way. "Your faith has made you well," says Jesus.

Another translation is "Your faith has saved you." And this may sound like a small detail, but I don't think it is at all: The verb tense used in this passage implies both a present and ongoing reality. You are now well, and you will be well. You are now saved, and you will be saved – rescued, healed, restored – made well forever.²

From this day forward, know that you are loved. And your life will never be the same again. Truly, it will not! At the heart of all things there is God, there is love. Scripture says that nothing can separate us from God's love in Jesus. (Romans 8:38-39)

Receiving this love brings us into right-relationship with God, with others, and with the whole creation. In the reign of God we are deeply connected. We are isolated no more. We are not alone. In the reign of God we are loved forever and always through Jesus Christ our Lord. And for this, we give praise to God! And, falling at Jesus' feet, we too say "thank you!"

² Chelsey Harmon, <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2022-10-03/luke-1711-19-3/>, Accessed October 3, 2022.