

**Thanksgiving 2020**  
**To bless the space between us**  
**Luke 17:11-19**  
**Rev. Sharon Smith**

**Introduction:**

We live our lives suspended between cries for help and expressions of gratitude.

This is a complex Thanksgiving Day

- A complex day where we are leaning into the spiritual practice of gratitude, straining to notice each gift that is given.
- A complex day where we are also grieving the loss of familiar celebrations with neighbours, extended family and friendship circles. And living into uncertainty and insecurity about the political, social and natural world around us.

And today, this is where **we encounter Jesus** - walking also in a liminal space.

“The Lukan narrator sets the stage by reporting that Jesus, journeying toward Jerusalem, was on his way through the land that bordered Samaria and Galilee (v.11). Because of the mutual distrust and hostility between Jews and Samaritans, it would not be unusual for a Galilean Jew bound for Jerusalem to skirt Samaritan territory.”

“The vagueness and ambiguity of the geographical reference in 17:11, therefore, is suggestive. Jesus is walking through a liminal zone, a place of transition, a place "between," where neither Galilean nor Samaritan is at "home" (on the concept of liminality, see Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*)”

This is foreign territory for everyone.

*John T. Carroll, Dean of Theology Faculty Union-PSCE, Richmond, Virginia*

How do we hold faith in this liminal space?  
How do we give and receive thanks in this uncertainty?  
How do we bless the ones we love on this day?

---

And in this story, we encounter two foreigners.

**Jesus is a foreigner** in this liminal land.

“One can almost envision Jesus walking with one foot in each culture!”

And the narrative gives us insight into a surprise moment, as Jesus receives personal thanks for something he does.

Jesus, the activist, the wise teacher, the prophet, the messenger from God, the Holy One – mostly directs all praise to God.

Yet in this instance, the returning leper offers Jesus not only glory to God, not only a physical gesture of praise but a word of personal thanks – in the Greek: Eucharistein.

And it evokes a curiosity in him about the many times he has given and not received, and it evokes a blessing.

**Learning to receive, learning to ask for what we need for many of us in the giver role is challenging.**

We might find ourselves in one-way relationships – where we pour ourselves out and internally we are growing in resentment. In our Christian culture, we pat ourselves on the back and say it is better to give than to receive, while our hearts become hardened.

This is a time to attend to what we really need. And not to fall into the trap of **spiritual bypassing**. This is when we use spirituality to avoid, suppress, or escape from uncomfortable issues in life.

*The term ‘spiritual bypassing’ was originally coined by psychologist John Welwood in 1984. As he explained in an interview,*

*Spiritual bypassing is a term I coined to describe a process I saw happening in the Buddhist community I was in, and also in myself. Although most of us were sincerely trying to work on ourselves, I noticed a widespread tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks.*

Today is a day to ask for what we need. To be just where we are.

To admit if it's hard to be grateful. To admit where the grief is or the tiredness and exhaustion.

To open our hands to receive. And to entrust others into the care of God.

---

Words that bless us can come from unlikely sources.

John O Donahue describes how a blessing calls forth – it imagines and wills the fulfillment of desire. That is why we use the word “May”... it is the space between real desire and imagined fulfillment – “May you be”, “May it be so...”

It is a place of living water - where the human heart pleads with the Divine heart and learns to trust grace.

*“To bless the space between us”*

---

And in this narrative – an unlikely man – the other foreigner in the story - a Samaritan man offers a blessing to Jesus – a word of thanks.

This man – leper #10 – branded, excluded, not allowed to be part of community. Doubly stigmatized when on Jewish territory - a Samaritan and a leper.

As a person stricken with leprosy he must live “outside the camp” and cry out “Unclean, unclean” when anyone approached (Num 5:23, Lev 13:45-46).

Should a leper be healed, the person was required to be cleansed by the priest prior to returning to the community (Lev 14:2,23).

Leprosy, a disease of the skin in Biblical times, (not what we now call Hansen’s disease) was a physical condition, an emotional condition (filled with shame and despair), a social condition (isolating and lonely), and a religious condition (priests were taught how to diagnose skin conditions and how to ritually cleanse someone who was healed, ushering them back into the community).

While the other nine – rushed to their priests to get the all clear, this man returned. I wonder if he thought: what good is a priest’s announcement of no skin disease, when his appearance of mixed Jew/Assyrian still excluded him as a Samaritan – he was a man who had never belonged.

Like so many young racialized boys today – I wonder if his parents gave him ‘the talk’:

- The authorities are not on your side, don’t forget you are different
- Be extra polite, don’t go along with the rest of the kids. Don’t forget you are different.

So he returns to the liminal space and offers what little he had.  
Gratitude.

And in return – his faith, a faith that received scorn everywhere else, was blessed.

---

On this Thanksgiving day - when we are leaning into gratitude because we know we need to, but we are also holding so much more than that.

How will we bless each other? I wonder what are the desires of your heart that we can imagine today and call forth?

I leave you with some questions that might help us imagine our desire:

What dreams did I create last night?  
Where did my eyes linger today?  
Where was I hurt without anyone noticing?  
What new thoughts visited me?  
What differences did I notice in those closest to me?  
Where did I neglect myself?

What did I begin today that might endure?  
Where did I allow myself to receive love?  
With whom today did I feel most myself?  
What reached me today? How did it imprint?  
Who saw me today?  
Why was I given this day?

*John O'Donohue, To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings,*

Amen.

ceive the same miraculous healing. But only one returns to give thanks. The story raises two questions: What made the response of the 10th leper different? And what is our response when we are the beneficiaries of God's mercy and grace?

These 10 lepers have much to teach us, the longer we remain in their company. That is a creepy proposition, because leprosy is a repellant condition. Of course, biblical leprosy has to be separated from Hansen's disease, the medical name for what we used to call leprosy. Hansen's disease did exist in biblical times, mostly in hot, humid areas. But scholars and medical folk agree that the majority of cases of leprosy described in the Bible were a host of other maladies, including ringworm, severe eczema, and other ailments of the skin. According to the diagnosis of the disease in Leviticus, biblical leprosy could likewise infect clothing or houses, which might need to be burned or razed. This mold could make a place as unclean and untouchable as a person with a frightening rash.

In reviewing biblical leprosy, we learn that it is more than a physical disease. It is a condition with awful social, emotional, and spiritual ramifications. It carried with it a moral judgment and a sentence of ostracism. Because scripture writers use the term *leprosy* loosely, we can be forgiven for doing the same and looking at leprosy as more than a physical condition. Let's borrow the motif of 10 lepers for a moment and through them consider 10 possible leprosy that might be presented to Jesus for healing.

**T**HE FIRST ANGUISH OF LEPROSY COMES FROM THE DISEASE itself, which corrupts the flesh and corrodes the spirit. It is hard to be sick, to have the body's strength sapped and to endure suffering that has no remedy. This is the leprosy that many of us will sooner or later come to terms with: in hospital wards, doctor's offices, and our own beds, as fevers and infections, cancers and disabilities, diabetes, strokes, and heart attacks. The event of illness comes all in a moment and strikes us intimately and irrevocably, changing our relationship to our bodies in a way that feels like betrayal. In illness, we seek health; but more than health, we long for healing, for a return to the trust we once had in our bodies as part of ourselves. It used to be good for us to be here, in the flesh. "Will that feeling ever return?" we ask Jesus.

The second torment of leprosy is shame. In shame we also feel betrayed by our bodies, but it is our sexuality that is particularly wounded. From the time we are young, we have been taught to disapprove of our bodies and to mistrust them, to find fault with our looks and our urges. Many of us

**B**eing a leper means being unloved. It means being detached from those who once loved you.

have developed a terrifying relationship to food that poisons our ability to nourish ourselves. Some of us eat or drink until we are sick; some of us starve ourselves until we are dangerously ill. Few of us see ourselves realistically in the mirror. All we can see is what we have been taught to loathe, that girl or boy who is never good enough, neither beautiful

nor worthy. Can Jesus take our shame away and give us something to ease the hunger?

Next to arrive is the despair of leprosy. It can include all of our personal failures that add up to cynicism and bitterness. Some of us lost hope long ago, surrendering our innocence for realism. We may have learned early that the world is a mean place, and if you aren't tough, you'll be mowed down. So we got tough, hardened our hearts, and forgot how to love. What's left is a kind of dull depression, a lightheadedness that sometimes makes us feel giddy, like we're standing on the edge of self-destruction. Could Jesus give us a reason to live?

Leprosy also brings loneliness. It isolates you from others, circumscribes your world with estrangement. No one can share this place with you, not even those you once held close. They don't know how to relate to you anymore; this difference has raised an invisible yet impenetrable barrier. Before they knew this thing about you, their love seemed real. But now you wonder if they ever loved you. Leprosy has exposed the flaws in their commitment, and this center you once called family now has a hollow sound to it, like an abandoned house. Can Jesus heal the broken heart?

Outright exclusion is part of the legacy of the leper. Society as a whole shuns you, and you find yourself relegated to the wild places, where outlaws roam and evil thrives. It's the realm of the foreigner, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan. Leprosy is where each of us learns what it means to be a Samaritan: to be hated because of the color of our skin or the sound of our words. What can Jesus do about a world that resists the outsider?

Lepers are untouchable. They may have real, communicable diseases that make their bodies off limits for normal human tenderness. Or they may be seen to communicate bad ideas, bad morals, bad karma, or bad social stigmas. We don't want to be seen with lepers, for fear of being identified with them. Is Jesus willing to kiss a leper and break the spell of untouchability?

Being a leper means, fundamentally, being unloved. That's not the same as not being loved in the first place. It means being detached from those who once loved you. It's what a spouse feels when a marriage has gone cold. It's what the children of divorce fear as the memory of their parents shouting is all that's left of "home." When a friend trades you

**Jesus Heals 10 Lepers:**  
Luke 17:11-19.