

Sight for Sore Eyes Luke 17:11-19

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Luke tells us in chapter 17 that Jesus is traveling along the border of Samaria and Galilee. *Along the border*, which goes kind of like this [*demonstrate visually*] on a map, which leaves some readers scratching their heads. Why, by this point in the Lukan narrative, has Jesus not made more progress towards Jerusalem (which is way down here), and why is he traveling more or less horizontally on the map in order to get down there??

It might be the case that Luke is bad with geography . . . or maybe he is just *really good* at suggesting the ways of Jesus. If you know anything about Samaria and anything about Galilee, you know the two places aren't exactly on friendly terms. And Luke says *Jesus walks the border between them* . . . as if . . . as if the hostilities don't quite affect him like they do everybody else or as if he knew what he would find there in the deserted in-between space, or as if he were looking to walk a line of coexistence while everyone else stayed safely on their respective sides.

Whatever his motive, it is along the border between two hostile regions that Jesus runs into ten lepers all at once. Lepers were lower even than Samaritans. They were so low that you'll notice the normal racial distinctions don't even apply—that's how low they are. A Samaritan leper mixes with Jewish lepers—they've actually banded together, perhaps out of sheer necessity.

Now, if you've ever been at church camp when illness broke out, then I think you can visualize the comrodery that might have developed between the lepers. Because I imagine what happened between those ten was a lot like when that first person at camp or on a mission trip gets the stomach bug. You're in cramped quarters and there's not adequate medical care . . . which means you *all* get the stomach bug, and you *all* play nurse, and you *all* play clean-up crew. Once you've cleaned up somebody else's vomit, it's not long before the whole host of social reservations come tumblin' down. You've bled and puked with these people—no use being shy, composed, and polite anymore.

And that's how the ten knew they were pals for life. Your nose could be rotting off, but your friends wouldn't bat an eye. You could mention oozing puss and decaying toenails, and not a soul would cringe.

Among the closest of friends, especially friends who've shared a common sickness or hardship, all kinds of barriers are removed. There develops a level of freedom that you can't have with just anyone. And that's why the ten friends probably told leper jokes amongst themselves, and that is certainly why Jewish lepers were able to walk hand in hand with a Samaritan leper. Once they could see that everybody's flesh was rotting, I suppose it became less controversial what color the flesh was or who your descendents were. Everyone was all heaped together as a bunch of diseased souls on a journey, hoping to find healing. And that is where our story begins.

Prior to Jesus' arrival, these ten lepers have been roughing it, making do, living on the outskirts, staying clear of normal people. But, this motley, racially-mixed, diseased and dying crew have

begun to hear rumors about a prophet who works wonders—healing the sick, raising the dead, touching the untouchable. The normal boundary lines between clean and unclean don't seem to concern this prophet. Borders don't scare him away; in fact, he walks along them, looking for people to heal.

Word has it that he is headed their way. So on the basis of these scandalous rumors, the ten lepers drag what's left of their rotting carcasses into a circle and call a team meeting to order. Should they risk an encounter with this man of God? Should they seek him out?

“What have we got to lose?” says one.

“But what if he rejects us?” worries the youngest member of the group.

“What's one more rejection?” a seasoned member of the crew curses under his breath. “The worst that can happen is that he'll turn us away. Big deal! We've been around that block before. But who knows, maybe he'll welcome us.”

This insight starts a chain reaction; hope catches like a fever. More begin to chime in: “Yeah! What we've got to lose?!” The enthusiasm grows louder and stronger, and even the youngest one is convinced. The contaminated crew seems to have reached a consensus, and they set out together to meet the coming prophet.

No one notices that one member never voted. Everyone else is distracted by his own excitement. They haven't had something that gave them hope in years, and this one-in-a-million chance is enough to infuse disease-beaten bodies with new energy. But one member of the group isn't hopeful; he's scared out of his mind. Scared that Jesus *will heal* his friends. Because Jesus will surely overlook *him*, the Samaritan, but Jesus just might heal *them*, and thus take away the one thing he has left in this life. He's not *scared* that Jesus will reject the group—he can only *hope* that might be the case. He feels almost certain Jesus will reject *him* and *not them*—the worst part being that his only friends will then turn and reject him too.

But . . . he's been a part of the crew for seventeen years, and for seventeen years, they have always stuck together. He just didn't have the heart to speak up and try to persuade them away from meeting the prophet . . . so he kept quiet during the vote, and now he shuffles along at the back of the band of limping brothers, keeping his terrified thoughts to himself. *What will I do if they're healed? What will I do . . .*

An excited cry interrupts his thoughts. “There he is!” the young one sees Jesus first. The chatter amongst the crew stops and they gaze off into the distance at the approaching prophet. It's hard to explain how they know it's him, but they all know it as soon as they look at him. He is surrounded by disciples as he walks, but it is clear who is the rabbi and who are the students.

The infirmity-ridden bunch knows to keep their distance, and they do so respectfully. For a full minute they stand there dumb-stricken, slightly trembling. But then, as if they had planned a script, there arises from the group one unison voice, crying out, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!” To his own alarm, the Samaritan leper finds himself joining the cry with urgency.

As soon as the sound of their voices rise, Jesus stops in his tracks, turns and looks. Not the kind of look they were used to getting—not the startled stare of a child who has never seen skin disease, nor the fearful glance of a mother trying to keep her children at a healthy distance, nor the open gawk of an uncomfortable passer-by. This is a knowing look, unlike any other. The Samaritan leper is trying to hide behind the others, but Jesus’ eye catches even his, and Jesus sees him, knows him, reads him. During that gaze, time stands still, and the gaze would have been gift enough, except that Jesus interrupts the stunned silence . . .

“Go, show yourself to the priests.”

That’s all he says.

And it would have felt like a dagger in their hearts if it weren’t for the way he says it. They already know that priests will turn them away. They are hoping Jesus won’t. They are hoping against all evidence to the contrary that there IS someone in this world who might open his arms to welcome them. And in effect, he turns them away, turns them around. “Go. Show yourself to the priest.” That dreaded word: “Go.” They had longed to hear, “Come.” But there is something about the way he says, “Go,” that for the first time in their diseased lives, it doesn’t feel like they are being rejected. It feels as if they are being directed.

And each one of their hearts rises up and whispers, “Obey him.” And so they turn around and they go. *Even the Samaritan* hears the whisper. He works up the nerve to break that sacred gaze, turn around with the rest of the crew, and begin the painful hobble towards the synagogue. They all secretly want to stay there, close by that holy man. It doesn’t make sense to turn around after searching so long for him, and nothing has even happened yet, but they are strangely compelled to obey that voice.

Perhaps you can relate? It makes more sense to wait around, with every intention of moving and working once God brings the healing. But you’ve heard him, haven’t you, say “Go,” *before* your all your parts were in working order? The text says, “As they went, they were healed.” *As they limped along*, they were healed! Sometimes, if you’ve heard the whisper, you’ve just got to start limping.

Now a curious thing happens to the Samaritan after the healing. He had been terrified of losing his friends, but after they were all healed, the other nine just keep on walking, going along their way, and suddenly he knows that it is he who must leave them. They have forgotten Jesus’ gaze, but he has not, and the memory of it compels him to return. The text puts it this way, “One of them, when he *saw* that he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice.” Surely *all ten lepers* “saw” that they were healed. They couldn’t have *not* noticed when they suddenly re-grew a finger. But perhaps it is only this one leper who *truly sees*. The other nine are too mesmerized by the glory of their own restoration that they can no longer see past the wonder of their own two hands, past themselves to the One who gave them life, past themselves to their fellow brother who shares their joy. It would seem they have regressed back to where they view blessings as their right and their privilege to be hoarded rather than as magnanimous gift deserving of gratitude. But the Samaritan somehow *sees* and remembers that it was God who had healed him,

and sees that such a gift deserves a response. He sees that he has been healed, and so he knows then that he must leave them, and return to Jesus.

It's strange, isn't it? One day of healing has more potential to unite those ten men than years and years of common disease, but they miss it. The healing power of Jesus is more potent than contamination any day. He is the prophet with a knack for stamping out the borders that separate people, for walking along the lines that divide people. He never patrols to keep people out, but he walks borderlines on purpose, healing people and healing divisions.

So the ten ex-lepers *could have* moved forward—healed in more ways than one—now sharing a common story, a common miracle, and a common Savior. But unfortunately, nine lepers fail to truly see. Theologian Maggi Dawn writes, “The nine went right back where they came from, safely on the right side of the border, healed of their exterior problems but locked back into their prejudices.”¹ It seems it took a Samaritan—an outcast—to recognize the full implications of grace that heals not only our bodies but also our communities.

When the Samaritan returns and falls at Jesus' feet to thank him, Jesus says, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.” *Why does Jesus say that?* “Your faith has made you well.” The Samaritan had already been healed, back when he was limping his way to the priests. Is it possible that Jesus' words are creating a *new* reality, another healing, inside the ex-leper as Jesus speaks?

We all need healing in multiple layers. The Samaritan's skin is healed, but so is his vision—his vision of God, his vision of himself as one loved by God. The other nine experience healing too, but a different kind of contamination creeps into their once close-knit community and blinds them from seeing the truth, keeps them from responding to the miracle as they should.

The Samaritan, however, continues to choose faith, even after the first healing, and as he continues, the healing continues. Layer by layer by layer the power of God cleansing and restoring, wiping out borders, making all things whole.

I don't how many layers deep you go, or how long you've been limping along in faith—being healed and waiting to be healed. But I pray this: May you have the audacity to walk along borders that others avoid, knowing that you just might bump into Jesus as you limp there. May you have the eyes to see your healing as gift and to recognize your Healer. May you return often to give thanks. May your gratitude bubble over, knowing there is not a single layer of you so diseased that Jesus is not willing to touch it and make you clean, and there is not a single division amongst us where Jesus is not walking, looking for us and hoping to be seen. Amen.

¹ Maggi Dawn, “The Untouchables,” *Christian Century* 124, no. 20 (Oct 2007): 18.