

How could you not be grateful?

How could you not be grateful for the healing of the skin condition that had made you ritually impure and had forced you to live separate from your loved ones?

How could you not be grateful when you learned that a miracle worker had entered your out-of-the-way leper colony on the border between Samaria and Galilee?

How could you not be grateful when he acknowledged your cry for mercy, after you realized that if you all shouted together he might hear you across the required distance?

How could you not be grateful when he sent you off to the priest to confirm your cure and restore you to your community, away from the margins, back in the mainstream?

The answer is, you couldn't not be grateful. In Luke's story of the 10 Lepers from today's Gospel, I wonder if the other 9 get a bad rap, as though they had taken Jesus' healing and just waltzed off to go on with their lives. It seems to me that these guys were just doing what Jesus told them to do, and what their faith tradition required of them. I can't imagine that the faith in Jesus' word, which healed them along the way, didn't also yield gratitude. Because they had been healed. Or they wouldn't be going to the priest to have their healing confirmed.

So what is going on here? Is the story of the 10 Lepers perhaps a story about something more than one thankful person and nine ingrates?

I think it is. And I think we need to pay attention to a few things: who is doing the thanking, where he is doing the thanking, and whom he thanks for his healing.

First of all, let's figure out where Jesus is located in this story. The gospel says that he is walking between Samaria and Galilee. He is traveling along a dangerous border, with his own people on one side and their long-held enemies the Samaritans on the other. And in this border place, this margin, we encounter a community of rejects from both sides. Here is a village that is home to lepers, both Judean and Samaritan.

Now Judeans and Samaritans had very similar beliefs, especially in the laws of the Torah, laws that had something to say about being ritually clean and unclean and what to do about it. Diseases of any kind that made the skin appear to have more than one shade made you ritually unclean, according to the book of Leviticus. It didn't mean that you were sick or a sinner. But a highly scrupulous view that you had to be pure to be God's chosen people, meant that if you or your animals or even the curtains in your house had spots, they had to be ritually cleansed.¹ Both Samaritans and Judeans believed they were God's chosen people; they just didn't believe the other group had claim to the title. So they would have taken the laws governing leprosy seriously.

¹ See *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*. Edited by: Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan
Publisher: Oxford University Press

If you were such a leper, your skin ailments required quarantine or exile until the condition passed. If it passed. It took a priest to put you there and priest to get you out.

What's interesting about this story is that this leper colony seems to have both Judeans and Samaritans in it. I wonder if this isn't the way of borderlands. Rather than being places of firm demarcation, they tend to be places where the edges blur a bit, where culture is exchanged, languages are shared, marriages mingle. The margins can be both places where the rejected are pushed out to, and where new peoples form. Like the land of misfit toys.

Now it's important to know that one of the main things that Samaritans and Judeans disagree on is where the central place of worship is. Israel worships in Jerusalem. Samaritans worship on Mt. Gerizim. So if the Samaritan decided to accompany his 9 Judean companions, it likely meant a trip to Jerusalem to visit the priests at the temple. And that would have been a pretty tough call, given his ancient prejudices. Or he could head back to Mt. Gerizim and try to find a priest there.

But instead he finds a new way, according to biblical scholar Dennis Hamm.² He notices his own healing as he goes, healing that has come from Jesus, whose mercy he had implored. And rather than seeking out a priest to let him into one community or the other, he goes back to Jesus, who met him on this borderland. And the Samaritan praises and worships God there. He kneels at the feet of Jesus in thanksgiving on the holy ground of that borderland and he enters the Kingdom of God.

Where were the other nine? They are on their way to a priest who would give them their old life back. Who wouldn't be grateful for that? It's just that Jesus didn't come to give us our old lives back. He came to give us something new, a life with God that is open to all, that crosses borders and undoes them.

When the Aramean soldier Naaman was cured of his leprosy by the prophet Elisha in the first reading, he declared "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel." Which was saying a lot, for a man who typically worshipped a thunder god named Haddad.

The Samaritan in Luke's gospel was essentially saying that the one God in all the earth wasn't restricted to Gerizim or Jerusalem, but could be found right there in the borderland where the Samaritan had been in exile, right in the Word of Jesus who met him there. That was the faith that made him well.

The Good News of Jesus Christ is that God walks the margins and the borders to meet us, to heal us and to create a new kind of community out of the mixed up lot of us.

Some of us may know our own stretch of the borderlands pretty well, that place where we don't quite meet the expectations of the dominant culture. We might be women trying to manage in a world stacked against us. Men who cannot bear what the culture has insisted we be. We might be non-binary or navigating identity in ways that many don't understand. We might have impairments or emotional pain that seems to set us apart.

If we are familiar with the borderland, then know that Jesus is too. This is where he chose to walk again and again in his few years in our human skin. He walked those margins all the way to Jerusalem, and to the cross. But those were not the only places he went. His 12 followers weren't people of the margins,

² DENNIS HAMM, What the Samaritan Leper Sees: The Narrative Christology of Luke 17:11-19. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (April, 1994), pp. 273-287

per se, but a group of friends from Galilee. However, he took them to the margins time and again, out of their comfort zone, into uncharted territory.

The gospel asks us what are the border places that we've never visited, because they were too far from the mainstream where we live most of our lives?

The Samaritan Leper, the one who returned, teaches us that the borderlands can be a place of gratitude rather than alienation, when we acknowledge that Jesus' healing and God's Kingdom can be accessed there. To what borderland is Jesus leading St. Peter's? How might we do the work of Christ there? Is this where the reign of God is waiting to be found – in the margins, the in-between places, the uncharted points of connection with Jesus and one another?

Perhaps the other nine, in their gratitude, are heading back there now. Better late than never.

Amen.