

Luke 17:11-18    10.9.25    Pentecost 18    Bill Uetracht

Sometimes it strikes me that it is worth our/my while to pay attention to the small moves in Biblical texts, to words, phrases, and realities that can easily be overlooked. One such reality that caught my attention this week occurs at the beginning of the gospel text: “On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.”

The region between Samaria and Galilee. The space between two areas, two areas that are not at all the same. We’re leaving home. Enemy territory is in sight. But now we are in In-Between-ville. Some people call this a “liminal” space. It is a transition point, a threshold. You are not quite in one room or the other.

We frequently find ourselves in liminal spaces. And many of us would like to avoid them. They are not always comfortable because they often are between the known and the unknown. Widows and widowers are thrown into that space. Newly retired people experience that space. People who enter a church community for the first time are in that space. People who are waiting for the results of a potentially difficult diagnosis are there. Those who are dying know all about liminality, as do those who are moving, divorcing, going from school to school. Our country knows liminality. I suspect we are in an In-Between place right now.

Today Jesus is in an In-Between place. And in this In-Between place he comes across a group of people with skin diseases, who have been subjugated to an In-Between-place life. They have been separated from other folks because they are unclean, a threat to the ritual and probably physical health of the community. It is these separated-out folks, who cry out from a distance--they are

appropriate and obedient folks--when Jesus comes into their village, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” They must know who this man is. They must know that in him there is healing mercy. They must know that in him is that which will launch them out of this in-between place. They have been living in liminality for too long. They want to get back home. They cry out for mercy.

You know, when we are in those in-between places, we often become aware of our wounds. Our wounds sometimes are why we are there. Our losses, our sicknesses, our broken hearts, our broken relationships, our broken nation, our addictions, our being reduced to being a number, a statistic, or a consumer by our culture—these wounds do not heal quickly, and they make us ache, even though we want to pretend that we are okay. We are not. Our lives cry out for mercy. “Jesus, have mercy on us.”

Let’s hear it for the lepers who are honest. Sometimes when you have lived in an In-Between place for so long, you don’t have time for cover-up games. You need mercy, and you need it now.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, once said that to be holy is to be real. Sadly, holiness has often been sold as a matter of having everything together, dotting all your moral I’s and crossing all your moral T’s. But what if being whole is about being real, about living with the truth that your life and all lives cry out for mercy?

But our egos sometimes get in the way of that realization. Did you note today’s story about Naaman from Second Kings? This guy has a skin disease that was getting in the way of living the life he needed to live. His life cries out for help. But he almost misses the mercy. Why? Because his ego gets in the way.

The story tells us of a servant girl who recommends that Naaman connect with a prophet from Israel, Elisha. Naaman goes to the prophet Elisha only to be addressed by one of Elisha's *messengers*. That really ticked Naaman off. "Doesn't Elisha know who I am?" he seems to be saying. I am a bigwig. I got power. I matter. He should come out and greet me and do his magic over me. Offended, Naaman stomps off in a rage.

One of the most helpful things for me that Richard Rohr has ever said has to do with paying attention to why you find yourself getting abnormally worked up over things; why you find yourself getting offended by what people say. Often much of that offense, much of that anger, is rooted in the needs of your fragile ego. I know it's true for me.

Now I realize that talking with some company representative over the phone is by nature a challenging thing. But honestly, my boiling with anger in those conversations is often not about them, but my ego. I just want to say to them, "Do you know who you are talking to? Do you realize that I tell people what to do all the time? I am important, and you don't seem to recognize that!!" Nothing bothers me more than people who don't appreciate my expertise, my position.

Naaman almost missed the mercy because of his ego. He couldn't get over the fact that Elisha's messenger told him to wash in the muddy, ugly Jordan, rather than the beautiful rivers in Syria, where he was from. Again, doesn't Elisha and his messenger know who I am? He wants me to do something simple. I am too important for the simple. Somebody like me deserves something fancier.

Maybe mercy is closer to home than we realize. Maybe health, true health is less about the fancy stuff, and more about the simple stuff that self-preoccupied egos can't seem to appreciate. Sometimes to get better, you have to swallow your pride; you have to be humble enough to ask for help and to receive it.

The lepers expressed such humility. You will note something somewhat unusual about the story of the lepers in Luke. Unlike in many healing stories in the New Testament, in this story Jesus doesn't touch the lepers to bring about their healing. He doesn't draw near to them. He simply tells them to show themselves to the priests. They are being sent back to the world from which they are excluded. And as they humbly head to the priests, they are healed. The healing happens in the journey. It happens as they obey Jesus' command, as they put one foot in front of the other to make their way to the priests.

This is how it works sometimes. Healing happens as we humbly take the journey, as we walk forward in faith, uncertain of the outcome. Somehow, we trust that mercy is operating underneath it all. Honestly, we don't know where we are going to end up. But we hear the call to obedience. We move forward. We trust in mercy. And mercy shows up. On the way, we are healed.

The story doesn't end there, though. There is more to true health, there is more to salvation, to wholeness than getting rid of eczema, the heartbreak of psoriasis, or some other skin disease. Jesus tells us that after the lepers were healed, one of them came back to him to express gratitude. There is something more to wellness.

“Where are the other nine?” he wants to know. And I don’t think he asks that because he wants them to feel guilty or for us to view them as naughty people. I remember when I was a kid being in the office of our pastor, receiving from him some kind of paper weight that I must have thought was cool. When I didn’t thank Reverend Lisle for the gift, my mom said, “Don’t forget about the nine lepers who didn’t thank Jesus for their healing. You should say, ‘Thanks.’”

I probably should have. But I don’t think this story is about appropriateness or the perfunctory, “Thank you.” It is about so much more. I love what Ian Mobsby says about the nine: “They represent the part of us that rushes forward, eager to control, to return to normality, to prove our worth.” They are all of us who simply want to return to life as normal.

But a hated Samaritan knows another way. He comes back to Jesus because he is overwhelmed with the sheer givenness of it all. He’s paying attention to what has happened. He, a man who was stuck in the liminal space of leprosy and who was hated by the Galileans, has been healed. He has been reconnected to the community. He can go home. He can go back to the temple. It’s all gift. It’s all grace. Gratitude is the right response.

And note what Jesus then says: “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” This hated Samaritan was healed earlier. Now he is *well*. The word for well means “saved.” Now he is saved, whole. You can get rid of sickness and not be well. Well people are grateful people, not entitled people, thinking they deserve everything. Well people are folks who are surprised by life’s mercy and who then fall at the feet of mercy.

The hated *foreigner* gets it. You are going to be surprised by those who get it, which is why it is so important for you, for me, for our nation not to close ourselves off from the foreigners. It is the hated foreigner who falls at the feet of Jesus, thanking him. And by the way, now there is physical intimacy in the story. The lepers were heard and healed from a distance. Now, as the leper lies at Jesus' feet, there is intimacy. This is what happens when wellness mixed with gratitude occurs. Community is restored. Intimacy is experienced. Life is transformed.

Wow! Who would have expected all of this to occur in an In-Between place? I know that it's not always fun to be there. I know that transitions are tough. But mercy runs the universe. Cry out for mercy! And be prepared to be surprised by and grateful for where mercy takes you.