

On the Margins of Thanks
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 111
Reading from the Gospels: Luke 17:11-19

Outside of succumbing to the urge for a pet armadillo, the odds of you contracting leprosy (Hansen's disease) are decidedly low. 95% of all people have natural immunity to the disease. In fact, according to the CDC, "Prolonged, close contact with someone with untreated leprosy over many months is needed to catch the disease." You cannot get leprosy from casual contact with someone. You cannot get it from shaking hands or hugging someone. You cannot get it sitting next to someone on a bus. You cannot get it sitting together at a meal. It is not passed on from a mother to her unborn baby, nor is it spread through sexual contact. And, as soon as a patient with Hansen's begins treatment, they can no longer spread the disease. About the only caution mentioned by the CDC is to, when possible, avoid contact with armadillos, some of whom are naturally infected with the bacteria, and even that risk is low.

Not a problem. I've never felt the impulse to hug an armadillo. In fact, I've only seen a couple of them in my lifetime, and one of those was roadkill.

Nevertheless, while easily treated, if someone with Hansen's is left untreated, it can become a debilitating illness, and as you might guess, the areas of the world where the disease is most active are those with high poverty and low access to medical care, places where illness only further marginalizes the already disenfranchised.

Debie Thomas, a writer for *The Christian Century* recalls a time she travelled to her parent's home country of India. She was standing in line with her father to buy tickets at a village train station. Her little brother pointed to two figures hunched over in a corner and asked their father what was wrong with them. Two weeks into their journey, Debie had become used to seeing the beggars, the blind, and the lame. She had needled her father for every coin she could get to give out, but this was different. The untreated disease had eaten away at their bodies, manifesting itself in deformities that were difficult to see. Her father told his children the men were sick. They had leprosy.

Thomas says, "The train station was crowded that day, swarming with travelers, vendors, and beggars. But what struck me about those figures huddling in the shadows was how alone they were. It was otherworldly,

profound and impenetrable in a way I could barely comprehend. It was as if some invisible barrier, solid as granite, separated them from the rest of humanity, rendering them wholly untouchable. Yes, their disease frightened me. But what frightened me much more was their isolation, their not-belonging.” (Debie Thomas, *The Christian Century*)

While it is said that the only thing constant is change, behaviors and attitudes very often fail to keep pace with knowledge and revelation. While medical and scientific advances have minimized a multitude of threats, humans continue to be creatively negligent in breaking down the walls of isolation to which those threats gave rise. While there is no acceptable reason that, 2000 years after Jesus’ encounter with the ten lepers, a child would be witness such suffering from what is now a treatable condition, we can comprehend Jesus’ determination to break down those walls, barriers, and boundaries built by fear.

Yes, the traditional and legitimate thesis of our story this morning is gratitude, but it is the context of the story that lifts it from the recycle bin of thank-you notes and transforms it into a way of life.

Luke tells us Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem, going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. Such travelogue is not just an aside, but is central to the message Luke intends. Earlier, in Chapter 9, Luke marks an important transition with two key observations: Jesus tells his disciples he is going to be betrayed into human hands, and seeing that time drawing near, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. The drama of the cross and its implications begin to loom larger.

So, somewhere along the way we find Jesus making his way along the border between Galilee and Samaria. Galilee is north of Samaria and Jerusalem is south of Samaria. That is significant because, some 900 years earlier during the reign of Solomon, son of David and king over a united Israel, an industrious young man named Jeroboam showed such promise that Solomon gave him the heinous, yet significant authority to oversee all forced labor in the kingdom. However, a prophet named Ahijah tracked down Jeroboam and told him that the Lord, who disapproved of Solomon's dalliance with other gods, would take 11 of Israel's 12 tribes away from Solomon and give them to Jeroboam. So, Jeroboam took off for Egypt and bided his time.

Yet, when Solomon died, his son Rehoboam was made king. Hearing this, Jeroboam returned from Egypt to confront Rehoboam about his mistreatment of the folks living in the northern part of the kingdom. The meeting did not go well, a bit too much testosterone clouding Rehoboam's judgment. Not only did he (ahem) make light of Jeroboam's manhood, he told him, *You think you had it bad under my Daddy, you ain't seen nothin' yet! Instead of whips, I'll use Scorpions. So, who's your daddy now?*

Well, it didn't take long for that message to get out on Instagram, producing the exact opposite reaction than Rehoboam intended, and quicker than it takes to toast a bagel, Rehoboam's chariot was breaking every speed limit, running for his life back to Jerusalem. And thus, the kingdom was split in two, Israel in the north, Jerusalem and Judah in the south. The historians of 1 Kings report, "So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day."

The tumult of the exile, first in Israel and later in Judah, only served to inflame the animosity between Judah and Israel, as prejudice evolved along with doctrine, culture, and the outside threats that push folks to be more and more insular. What really ticked off the folks with their big ol'

temple in Jerusalem was that the folks in the north had the gall to set up their own place to worship. With that, what began as *The Brady Bunch* had become *Real Housewives*.

Over time those prejudices only deepened, particularly in the region between Galilee and Judah, i.e. Samaria, with the folks in Judah codifying all the ways in which the Samaritans were bad, unclean, apostate. In fact, when traveling from Jerusalem to Galilee, Judeans would actually detour around Samaria so as not to go through that bad neighborhood; so as not to have any contact with those vile reprobates in Samaria.

Listen, I've heard the way the folks from Clemson and South Carolina, from Chapel Hill and Durham, from states Red and Blue talk about one another. And I have to say, it's pretty ridiculous and largely unfounded. The trash talking, the venom, the animosity wasn't sewn in at the beginning. But people being people (i.e. sinners), things like pride, ego, fear, insecurity always push us to draw lines, build walls, create hostility, salve resentments, manufacture enemies. How does it start? *I don't feel so good about myself, so maybe I can eliminate that bad feeling by creating the myth that I am better than you.*

You see, Luke is not just playing tour guide when pointing out that Jesus was traveling on the margins of Samaria; he is setting us up to expose our greatest failures and point out our highest calling.

So, “as [Jesus] entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’” Can you see it? Jesus is walking along the line that if crossed, if ignored, would put him into contact with those nasty Samaritans, and he comes upon a group of lepers who are additionally segregated, considered unclean and untouchable, by both Samaritans and Jews. So, what does Jesus do? He ignores both boundaries, setting in motion the lepers’ restoration to their families and communities; and additionally, Jesus makes one of those dreadful Samaritans the hero of the story. “When he saw them, he said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’ And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.” (*Gasps all around. Oh, the horror! A Samaritan!*)

Why make the Samaritan the hero? And, why call the other nine out? After all, they were just doing what Jesus told them to do. He said go to the priest, and they went to the priest. The Samaritan was the one deviating from the plan. Why is the one who ignores Jesus' instruction the hero here?

It is about the transformative power of recognition and gratitude. Jesus' instruction to the lepers was the culturally and legally accepted way to restore one to the privilege of community, but it doesn't necessarily provide community. Segregation, exclusion, hierarchy, excommunication, jealousy, presumption, old wounds, and meanness can still be a barrier to full restoration. Without equality, humility, hospitality, empathy, and compassion, any ritual signifying restoration is empty. There is a distinction between health and wellness. While health is an important component of wellness, very, very often, a person can be healthy yet unwell.

The nine did what was ritually and culturally appropriate, but that didn't necessarily make them well. They could be thus freed from physical exclusion while remaining far from inclusion. On the way to the priest, the leprosy may have vanished, but the Samaritan in the group was still a Samaritan. Yet, for the Samaritan at least, along with the clear skin came

the surprising recognition that wellness was ultimately not dependent on rituals, regulations, permission slips, or even health. I have known many, many people whose bodies may have been ravaged with illness and calamity, but who remain remarkably well. They exude grace and goodness. What's the difference? Gratitude.

Gratitude is a choice, a recognition that your life is a gift regardless of the challenges that may arise. "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan." Karl Barth asked, "What else can we say to what God gives us but stammer praise?"

A heart bursting with gratitude, the Samaritan realized that his wellness wasn't derived from rituals, stamps of approval, race, glorious reports on MyChart, or dressed up profiles. No, his wellness was a gift from Jesus Christ. C.S. Lewis said that "praise almost seems to be inner health made audible." Inner faith made audible. What do we sing, week in and week out? "Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

Gratitude transforms that which separates us into that which unites us. Thankfulness is living with the awareness that life is a gift, and no one is

going to spoil your celebration of it, for even your deepest sorrow, your greatest pain, your most vexing challenge, through God's grace can be transformed into a grateful awareness of how you have grown and how our sorrows cannot compare to the joyous memories of what was shared before the loss.

In 1974, late-night icon Stephen Colbert was a ten-year-old being picked up from school in Charleston, SC, surprisingly, by his older brother. His brother didn't answer when Stephen asked why, but Stephen connected the dots when he saw his mother crying, collapsed across her bed. Eastern Airlines flight 212 crashed on approach to Charlotte-Douglas airport, killing 72 including Stephen's father and two brothers, Peter and Paul. That news is a horrendous cliff for a boy to fall off of at that age, well, at any age, really. Life altering, life questioning, world damning, wretched loss. Yet, Stephen says, in an earlier interview and a recent podcast with Anderson Cooper, "If you're grateful for your life, then you have to be grateful for all of it." (*All There Is*, Podcast, Anderson Cooper)

Colbert, a person of abiding faith, can't say how he can be grateful for a life that includes great tragedy, but that he just knows the value of it. He says, "that realization did not come until, you know, I'm on the doorstep of

middle age. Literally walking down the street, I was struck with this realization that I had a gratitude for the pain of that grief. It doesn't take the pain away. It doesn't make the grief less profound. In some ways, it makes it more profound because it allows you to look at it. It allows you to examine your grief in a way that it is not, like holding up red hot amber in your hands, but rather seeing that pain as something that can warm you and light your knowledge of what other people might be going through. Which is really just another way of saying there is a value to having experienced it.”

Nine lepers found a temporary clean bill of health, but the Samaritan found something more. No less than the other nine would he have to face the vagaries and prevarications and rejections of life, but a recognition of the gift and Giver of life, birthed within him a thankfulness for the whole of life that nothing could quench, even on the margins. Like praise, gratitude is inner health expressed. Yet, just to be on the safe side ... maybe hold off on hugging an armadillo. Amen.