

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
12 October 2025

Luke 17:11-19

Border crossings can be scary and dangerous places, and this is as true of geographical places as it is about life transitions. Let me explain. The area between two countries is often labeled “no man’s land.” These areas are often very dangerous because the law of either nation is seldom enforced in these isolated areas, especially if there are questions about jurisdiction. In some countries, these are areas teaming up with criminal elements, insurrectionists, and the very poor. Life transitions can also be scary moments. These liminal moments, between what was and what will become, can also be confusing and dangerous. We know we can’t go back to where we were, but the new reality has not yet been revealed. Many feel stuck in no-man’s land, a place filled with uncertainty, doubt, and fear. I contend that the men healed in our story today are caught in a geographical and a spiritual no-man’s land. Of the ten, only one finds a way through, as he teaches us a valuable lesson for life in our own world today.

The passage today reminds us that Jesus is still on the move to Jerusalem, where he will be put to death. If you remember, he has been on the move since the end of Chapter 9, right after the episode of the Transfiguration. Today he is in the region between Samaria and Galilee. This is a stretch of land on the outer edge of both regions, an area often inhabited by beggars and people with leprosy. As you remember, these people are often shunned by their families and communities and forced to beg at the outskirts of towns, near roads used by travelers. The custom would have been for them to shout from a safe distance away for people to throw them some alms in the form of a coin or some food. In the Gospel of Luke we have seen Jesus heal many in Temples, towns, and even homes. Today, we see him heal people at the very edge of society, in the hard places of an area considered “no man’s land.” An area inhabited by a mixture of Jewish and Samaritan outcasts.

As he entered a village in this border area, ten lepers approached him. “Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’” Luke doesn’t tell us how, but it is obvious that these men knew who this Jesus was. Perhaps they had heard of his miraculous healing. Perhaps all they were hoping for was some food. In fact, other than the generic “Have mercy on us” we don’t hear any specific request. Jesus saw their desperation and shame. He knew what they needed even before they spoke. He is comfortable at the edges of society. This “no-man’s land” is God’s land and these lost sheep are his sheep.

When Jesus saw these people, “he said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’” Only a priest could certify that a healing had in fact taken place and allow the person to return to their families and communities. This is a mandate of both Leviticus and Deuteronomy. We are told that when they heard this command, all of these men obeyed and started walking towards the village’s priest. I want to pause here to highlight the faith of these men. This Jesus could have said this to get rid of them. This could be a ploy to quiet their loud cries for help. But in the same way we saw Naaman, in the Old Testament story today, trust the prophet Elisha, these men chose to trust Jesus. Perhaps it was the tone of his voice that convinced them he could be trusted. Perhaps it was his demeanor. Perhaps they felt an internal conviction that told them this man was different and needed to be believed. In any case, faith is never passive. It always requires action and commitment.

The story tells us that “as they went, they were made clean.” Here the story remains quiet about how they were made clean, whether all of them noticed and felt their healing, and why only one of them chose to return to Jesus. It could be that the man, being a Samaritan, did not believe in the necessity of obeying the Jewish scriptures. It could be that he no longer had a home and a community to be reunited to. It could be that he hoped to join this Jesus and his group. It could be that he had seen what the others had failed to see, that this Jesus loved him unconditionally regardless of his sense of isolation, his loneliness, his filth, his disconnection from God and his community. Many questions and no answers.

The story continues, “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.” This man saw that he was healed, he paid attention and was willing to see what the others ignored. But his seeing went beyond a physical healing. He also saw in his mind’s eye that he had come face to face with the Divine power working through this man, Jesus. He saw that in this Jesus there was power and authority. He also realized that gratitude must always turn to worship and worship must not be delayed. Worship must be instantaneous; it must happen at the moment of the healing. He didn’t know how everything fit within God’s plans, but he knew he had to return and worship God at the feet of Jesus.

Then Luke tells us that “he was a Samaritan.” This is not the first time Jesus gives us an outcast as the hero of a story. Remember the “Good Samaritan” story. While the decent, law abiding, righteous Judeans pass by the injured man, a Samaritan does the unexpected, by rescuing the injured man and taking care of him. The Samaritan of today is also an example of faith. When it comes to this Jesus, it is often those considered enemies and outcast who are most willing to recognize who he is, his Divinity, and his mission as the Messiah. I have said

before how Samaritans are despised by Judeans who mock their faith and traditions and treat them as foreigners, although they are distant cousins. Righteous Judeans avoid walking through Samaritan territory and would never under any circumstance befriend people from this region. To them, they are filthy and unrighteous before the law of Moses. They are the undesirable and unclean.

Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" This is a criticism similar to the implied criticism of those righteous Judeans who passed by the injured man and did nothing to help in the Good Samaritan story. The nine Judeans who were healed were so concerned about satisfying the requirement of the law, which demands that they show themselves before a priest, that they failed to do the right thing before God, which was to return to Jesus in gratitude and to worship God for their healing. Likewise in the Good Samaritan story, the righteous Judeans were so concerned with their lives, and perhaps with the satisfaction of all the requirements of their law, that they failed to assist one of their own. This is ultimately a criticism on those so preoccupied with the logistics of religion that they fail to see and worship the Lord of their religion, and to serve the people their God places in their lives.

Then Jesus said to the man, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." Now, so that there are no doubts, all ten were healed, but only one of the ten was saved. The word used for "made well" also means saved. This man received much more than physical healing, he also received spiritual health. His isolation from God was healed. His sins were forgiven. His soul was made well, and Jesus said this was the result of his faith. His active decision to return to Jesus was rewarded with spiritual healing and union with God. As I said before, faith is active, or it is no faith at all. Faith does something. It must always lead to obedience (all ten obeyed) and it must always lead to joy and worship (only one worshiped). Faith without thanksgiving is empty and shallow.

Many of us are very good at elevating our supplications to God at moments of need or despair, but we fail to give God the glory God deserves. We are rich in petition and poor in thanksgiving. The Samaritan today teaches us that everything we have is a gift from God and that thanksgiving is always the appropriate response for every gift. God in Jesus is always willing to meet us where we are, even if we are in a threshold territory, stuck in a liminal position, caught between what was and what will be. But we must pay attention to what God is doing in our lives, and we must be grateful for God's love and protection. If we don't pay attention, we may just miss what's in front of us. May our Lord continue to heal us. Amen!