



Ten Lepers Healed, Brian Kershisnik

A Person with Leprosy Encounters Jesus

SCRIPTURE

Luke 17:11–21

MAIN IDEA

Jesus challenges us to overcome our prejudices, embrace others, and invite them into the community of faith.

OPENING PRAYER

Behold, Lord, an empty vessel that needs to be filled. My Lord, fill it. I am weak in faith; strengthen me. I am cold in love; warm me and make me fervent, that my love may go out to my neighbor. I do not have a strong and firm faith; at times I doubt and am unable to trust you altogether. O Lord, help me. Strengthen my faith and trust in you. In you I have sealed the treasure of all I have. I am poor; you are rich and came to be merciful to the poor. I am a sinner; you are upright. With me, there is an abundance of sin; in you is the fullness of righteousness. Therefore I will remain with you, of

whom I can receive, but to whom I may not give. Amen.

Martin Luther, 1483–1546

INTRODUCTION

Do you know what it is like to be an untouchable?
To be so filthy and disgusting
That people shrink away from you
Do you know how it corrodes your soul
To see how the stench that follows your
rotting flesh

Contorts people's faces in disgust
Even from miles away?
I tell you, you die a thousand deaths
Each time you see them cover their faces
To protect themselves from the putrid air
That surrounds you
And they scurry away
Revolted by your very shadow

Being a leper
Is the nightmare you can't easily shed
How unlike your body that easily sheds
Your fingers . . . one by one

And then you hear of a Healer
A Nazarene
A carpenter turned preacher
Who mingles with prostitutes
With tax collectors
Society's untouchables

Luke 17:11–21

¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³ they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" ¹⁴ When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were

made clean. ¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶ He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?" ¹⁸ Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this

foreigner?" ¹⁹ Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." ²⁰ Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; ²¹ nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

Outcasts like you and you think . . .
Maybe, . . . just maybe

There was silence
As they all witness my rebirth
Finally, I looked up to see
The most compassionate face
That I had ever seen in my life
I saw tears running down His face
And yet, His smile rivaled the sun
And the next thing I knew
I was in His embrace
Whole . . . body and soul
Whole
All because
He touched me.¹⁹

Excerpts from the poem *He Touched Me*
by Eileen Manassian Ghali

Leprosy was one of the most agonizing diseases in the ancient world. In the Bible, seven people are recorded as afflicted with the disease: Naaman (2 Kings 5:1), Gehazi (2 Kings 5:27), Joab and his household (2 Sam 3:29), Uzziah (2 Chr 26:21), and Simon the leper (Mt 26:6). Two other stories

appear in the Synoptic Gospels in which people with leprosy are unnamed. One story is told in Matthew 8:1–4, Mark 1:40–45 and Luke 5:12–16 and the other is our story for this lesson from Luke 17:11–21. According to Luke, Jesus healed ten people with leprosy but only one returned to thank him. The actions of the one who returned have been understood to be a prime example of Christian gratitude. But the question of why this healed one returned to express gratitude is central to understanding the story.

EXAMINING THE CHARACTERS

While Luke is the only writer to include the healing of the ten, the narrative shares some similarities with the Synoptics's stories of Jesus healing the unnamed person covered with leprosy. The characters mentioned in Luke 17 are Jesus, the ten who are ill (one who is identified as a Samaritan), and the priests.

According to Luke, on the way to Jerusalem Jesus traveled through the region between Samaria and Galilee (Lk 17:11). On the way to Jerusalem Jesus entered a village and ten people with leprosy approached him. The New Revised Standard

¹⁹ Excerpts from Eileen Manassian Ghali's poem, "He Touched Me"; poetrysoup.com/poem/he_touched_me_472121

Version of the Bible refers to these people as “ten lepers,” but in the original Greek, they are referred to as “leprous men.” Rather than speaking of people as “lepers,” “paralytics,” or “demoniacs,” Luke uses the terms “man who was paralyzed,” or “man who had demons.” When we use terms like this it is less likely that physical circumstances will define who we are as human beings.

One characteristic of the healed man who returned to thank Jesus is his ethnic identity; he was a Samaritan. Samaria was the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, and the city of Samaria (now modern-day Sebastia on the West Bank) holds a significant place in the Bible. Located thirty miles north of Jerusalem in central Israel, this region has been the focus of renewed interest and archaeological research that has led to revisions to the historical ways that Samaria is portrayed in ancient Palestine.

References to Samaria and Samaritans are concentrated in Luke-Acts and John. Mark and Matthew do not mention the geographical region of Samaria and Matthew refers to Samaritans just once, in Matthew 10:5. The region of Samaria is mentioned eight times in Luke-Acts, once in the Gospel (Lk 17:11), and seven times in Acts (1:8, 8:1, 8:5, 8:9, 8:14, 9:31, 15:3). With his embrace of the Samaritan, Jesus shows us what God wants from God’s people—effective love for one’s neighbor and sharing in the reign of God through Jesus. In Acts, Samaritan believers are incorporated into God’s expanding church under the power of the Holy Spirit. Through Jesus, God’s promise to renew all humanity comes to pass.

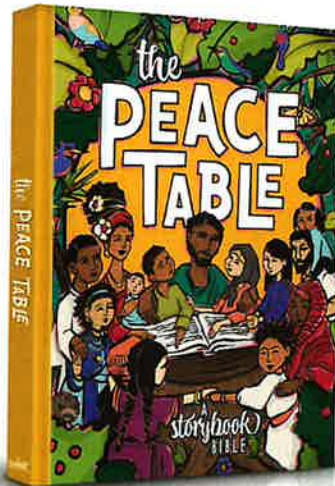
Contemplate

What illnesses or diseases in our current culture compare to leprosy? In what ways do they compare?

How does our faith inform our understanding about medical advances that cure diseases?

Do you think someone can be healed through faith without medical intervention?

Have you or someone you know been healed without medical treatment?



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SACRED ENCOUNTER

Many of the sacred encounters in Luke-Acts do not include the element of touch or any physical contact. Instead, people are healed or transformed through words, or Jesus' power and presence. Unlike other stories in the Synoptic Gospels and John, the ten people with leprosy in this story were not healed instantly. When they saw Jesus, the ten pleaded for mercy, perhaps needing money, food, or healing. Jesus responded to their request in accordance with the Torah, sending them to the priest for diagnosis (Lev 13:2–31), or to assess their healing and lift their quarantine (Lev 14:2–32). Before they reached the priest, the ten were healed.

On the surface, this narrative may seem like other Biblical stories of healing, but what comes next sets it apart. Ten sick people cried out to Jesus for mercy but only one returned to thank Jesus for what he had done. The one leper who returned was praised and the other nine were vilified. But it is important to note that all ten obeyed Jesus' instructions by heading out to see the priest.

The significance of the story is emphasized by the added detail of the ethnic identity of the healed one that returned. The man is identified as a Samaritan, a foreigner, and the other nine are Jews. All ten were outcasts because they suffered from leprosy, but this Samaritan man who returned to give thanks was doubly outcast because of his identity. Through the healing Jesus offered, the Samaritan man was physically restored and his humanity was affirmed. The healed Samaritan returns to glorify God and proclaims that Jesus Christ is God in the flesh. Throughout Luke-Acts (Acts 4:21; 11:18) people who glorify God for what they have seen and experienced respond to the inbreaking of the reign of God—the presence of God in Jesus Christ.

TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE

Samaritans were the despised outsiders of Jesus' day. If we imagine the hatred between Serbs and Muslims in present-day Bosnia, or the enmity that existed between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, we can begin to understand the complexity of the relationship between Jews and Samaritans. The conflict between these two groups was marked by centuries of political hostility and opposition. Doesn't that make this story even more astonishing? Even though Jesus was a member of the Jewish community, he did not withhold healing from the Samaritan. Jesus saw the suffering of the people with leprosy and he showed equal compassion to them all. In the Gospels, Jesus consistently accepted those whom society considered unwelcome outsiders. Encounters with Jesus transformed strangers into loved ones.

During my two decades in congregational ministry, I have witnessed churches spend hundreds of hours creating vision and mission statements to describe who they are and what they do. They wordsmith for hours to convince others that they are inclusive, open, and welcoming. With these statements communities of believers claim that they welcome people of different ethnic and racial groups, people who are sexually diverse, or people from a different economic class than that of their membership. But does that happen? When Jesus showed compassion for the Samaritan with leprosy he overcame centuries of ethnic conflict. How can we embody the love of Christ to overcome our prejudices and embrace others—people who are different from us, people we consider outsiders—and bring them into the community of faith? It is only when we embody the love of Christ that outsiders become insiders.

Contemplate

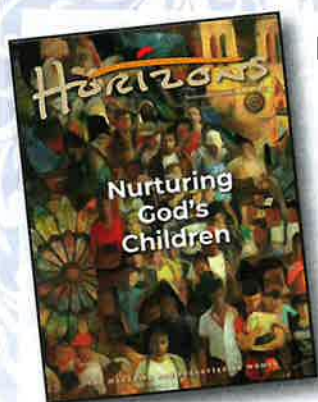
Who are the unloved outsiders of your congregation or your community?

Has your church had any programs in the past five years with people from a different racial or ethnic group? How would a relationship with a faith community from a different cultural background than your own enhance your faith?

CLOSING PRAYER

O Lord, who hast mercy upon all, take away from me my sins, and mercifully kindle in me the fire of thy Holy Spirit. Take away from me the heart of stone, and give me a heart of flesh, a heart to love and adore thee, a heart to delight in thee, to follow and to enjoy thee, for Christ's sake. Amen.

Ambrose of Milan, 339–397



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A Person with Leprosy Encounters Jesus

Overview: In this lesson's sacred encounter, a Samaritan helps us recognize holistic healing as well as systems that poison relationships and harm our sense of community. We are challenged to have faith in the miracle of Jesus healing a person with leprosy and healing our fixed ideas that limit life, discriminate, and isolate those who we consider to be "different."

Materials: Intercessory prayer notebooks; easel pad and marker

Prayer

Look closely at the art on page 44 that illustrates one Samaritan returning to Jesus to give thanks for being healed while the others run in the opposite direction.

Guide the group to meditate in silence before the opening prayer.

Read: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mt 18:20).

Invite the group to take three deep breaths.

Lead the group in the opening prayer.

Perform Luke 17:11–21

Invite participants to read the text divided into parts for the narrator (Luke), the Samaritan with leprosy, and Jesus. They may wear costumes and do a dramatic presentation or read together as a group. Consider having the group wrap strips of fabric around their arms as bandages and take them off to show Jesus' healing.

If participants are online, they can also wear costumes. Another option is to search for and share a short video of a performance based on the text.

Introduce the Lesson

Read or ask a volunteer to read the poem at the beginning of the lesson on page 45. Use the Introduction on page 45 to present this lesson to the group.

Contemplate

Discuss the questions on page 47.

Sacred Encounter

Having a contagious illness affects many aspects of our lives—just think about the experience of Covid-19. We can become out-of-sorts in more ways than feeling ill physically. Discuss how we can seek (and find) a balance of holistic wellness that includes our physical, mental, spiritual, familial, social, economic, political, and ecological selves. Prepare with the group a prayer for the holistic wellbeing of all.

Ask the group: How do we care for sick people in our communities and congregation? What opportunities do we have to improve the pastoral care we offer?

Transformative Experience

Ask the group: What situations, ideas, attitudes, or conflicts happening today may be harmful to the wellbeing of people? List the responses on an easel pad or where everyone can see them. Now ask the group to imagine themselves in the following situation.

A group from your congregation is preparing for a trip to Puerto Rico where they will work as volunteers. Members of the group are excited to visit a beautiful island in the Caribbean that has many tourist destinations.

In preparation for this trip, the group should consider this information.

Puerto Rico and the U.S. have a shared history since the Spanish-American War in 1898. The island is an American territory, just like American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The inhabitants of Puerto Rico are American citizens and the currency is the American dollar. They speak Spanish as their first language. Approximately three million Puerto Ricans live on the island and six million more in the mainland United States.

The Presbyterian Church arrived in Puerto Rico with other Protestant denominations when Puerto Rico became a territory of the U.S. Three presbyteries make up the Boriquén Synod of the PC(USA).

Before hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017, the island's economic situation caused a massive exodus to the mainland. At the beginning of 2020, a series of earthquakes severely affected the infrastructure of the southern area of the island. In the aftermath of Irma and Maria, the electrical system became unstable. During the Covid-19 isolation, when most people depended on the Internet for education, work, and socialization, unstable electric led to unstable internet and increased the stress experienced by everyone. The number of murders due to intra-family violence increased, the health and educational systems deteriorated, and even more professionals left the island.

The situation in Puerto Rico is an example of how the abundant life of God's Kingdom requires the different areas of our lives to be healthy and full. It also reminds us that it is important to know our neighbors' history, the reality of their lives, and the ties we can have in common.

Ask the group: How might the volunteer group approach the trip differently now that they have more information about Puerto Rico? What commonalities do you see between the trip participants and the Puerto Ricans they will be serving?

Closing Prayer

Ask someone in the group to read the closing prayer on page 49.

Until the Next Lesson

Add to the notebooks for intercessory prayers the names of people with skin conditions, countries that have experienced natural disasters, volunteer groups that help after disasters, and congregations that have or are considering cultural diversity ministries.

The next lesson is about a person who could not walk. Participants may want to pray for people with disabilities in preparation for the next encounter.