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Betwixt and Between

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We've been walking with Jesus toward Jerusalem for a number of weeks now. And as today's gospel passage opens, we find ourselves in No-Man's Land. It's the geography between Samaria and Galilee, which seems like a tiny detail maybe. Or is it? What we're hearing is that Jesus is in a place that is betwixt and between. And there he encounters people who, themselves, are betwixt and between. Whatever skin disease the ancients identified as Leprosy, it was a condition that crossed all boundaries. Gender, Age, Marital Status, Ethnicity, Nationality, it didn't matter. If you suffered from Leprosy, all of those old identifiers fell away, and you were lumped together. To everyone without Leprosy, you represented danger, chaos. You were betwixt and between – not who you were, and definitely not in a place you want to stay.

And there, in this place of liminality – that's the fancy word for betwixt and between which means “on the threshold,” Jesus encounters 10 Lepers who beseech him to heal them. Nine follow Jesus's directions to the letter, by going on to show themselves to the priests and be pronounced ritually clean; one turns back and offers thanks to God by falling at the feet of Jesus. And that one, we are told, was a Samaritan.

What are we to make of this?

Well one thing we cannot do is to assume that the 9 were necessarily ungrateful. After all, Jesus had told them to show themselves to the priest. That was what the Law required of those who believed themselves cured of leprosy. The Torah also made clear what kind of sacrifices of thanksgiving were to be offered in the temple. They were doing what they were *supposed* to do in the order in which they were *supposed* to do it. The Samaritan, by contrast, had no reason to go to the Temple in Jerusalem. As a Samaritan, he would not have been welcome. The priests there would have had no part in pronouncing him ritually clean nor would he have been allowed to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving, assuming he was even of a mind to do such a thing.

So it's probably reading too much into the account to assume a lack of gratitude on the part of the 9, or a superabundance of gratitude on the part of the 1. But we CAN perhaps draw some conclusions about the healed Samaritan: namely, that he acted directly and immediately. He turned and offered thanks and praise. He responded with worship.

Here's the thing. Most of us have had some experience being betwixt and between. Maybe you're on the verge of an empty nest. Maybe you're on the verge of retirement. Maybe you've lost someone important in your life to a death or a move. Maybe you've gotten a difficult diagnosis and you're not at all sure what the future holds. Important identifiers for us, maybe, have fallen (or are falling) away. We're not who we were and we're pretty sure we don't want to stay in that betwixt and between place because it's bewildering. Now what?

I'll tell you what. Jesus comes among us. Seeks us out in the No Man's Land that we sometimes find ourselves in, though we might not be aware of his presence and the healing grace that he brings. See, as a culture, we value self-determination, independence, self-reliance. We think we gotta figure this out on our own. Sometimes we shut down emotionally or spiritually. If we think of God's grace at all, we are often inclined to think of it as something for emergency purposes only -- kind of like the oxygen mask that pops out of the airplane bulkhead when needed, as opposed to the life-sustaining oxygen we are given to breathe moment by moment, day in and day out, all the days of our lives.

All 10 of the Lepers were radically open to Jesus's healing presence. The healed Samaritan is held up as an exemplar of how we are to be because he got it – down deep -- that he was continually in need of God's grace, and because he responded to that awareness with worship. Where the other 9 were restored to their families and friends, able to work and worship as before, the healed Samaritan went back to being a Samaritan – a despised foreigner in a hostile land. His continued well-being was not a foregone conclusion. He remained utterly dependent on the grace of God and he knew it.

And so it must be with us. How do we do it?

In a word, practice. And the good news is that the means of regularly practicing is within our grasp. It's what we do on Sunday mornings. It's why we're here. To practice gratitude. To make Eucharist. Oh yes, that's what the Greek word [εὐχαριστία](#) [eukharista] literally means Thanksgiving for the means of grace that is the Sacrament. And so we gather and we lift up our hearts. And sometimes those hearts are heavier than at other times. Sometimes those hearts are hurting. Because sometimes we've been betwixt and between for far too long. Lift 'em up anyway in trust that God's grace will be sufficient.

Because as that Samaritan showed us, it is right to give God thanks and praise.