

## **“GEOGRAPHY, ABUNDANCE, AND FAITH”**

Luke 4:16-30; 17:11-19

October 12, 2025

Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins

This story of ten people healed from a skin disease is both very much in keeping with the themes and concerns of Luke’s gospel ... *and* it’s also not quite like anything else the gospels tell us about encounters Jesus had in the course of his ministry. It’s most commonly treated as a sort of moral tale that contrasts gratitude with ingratitude. But there’s more going on here, if we can see past that. When we pause to wonder about the details, we can notice that some things about this encounter are kind of puzzling.

First of all, it takes place in a location that Luke describes as “between Samaria and Galilee.” Since Samaria and Galilee bordered each other, there really wasn’t a region between them. It’s possible Luke just doesn’t know the area well, or it could be that the border was not well-marked or that local people didn’t pay a lot of attention to it. Samaritans and Galileans were distinct groups, though – ethnically, culturally, religiously – so it’s also possible that folks in each group avoided getting too close to the border with the other. Whatever the reality, it’s significant that Luke sets this story in an in-between place, where the boundaries seem vague even if differences are real. A place of some tensions, perhaps. A place on the margins. Or, at best, a place where nothing much happens.

But Jesus’ presence here in this marginal, border place makes it somehow a sacred place.

After you’ve read the gospels for a while, you start to realize that when Jesus ignores or crosses a boundary that other people think he shouldn’t cross, something interesting is bound to happen. This isn’t the only time we see Jesus crossing a physical or cultural boundary: When a Roman officer asks for healing for his servant, Jesus heals the man. A woman from what’s now Syria argues with him and he agrees to heal her daughter. You probably remember that the longest conversation he has in the gospels is with a woman of Samaria. Jesus simply does not accept the constraints of the boundaries that divide people, and this in itself makes for the possibility of healing.

I wonder if this borderland location has something to do with the next sort-of-strange thing: This is the only Jesus story I can think of where a whole group of people approach Jesus as a body and ask to be healed. All four gospels offer various accounts of individuals Jesus healed. There are references to “crowds” and Jesus healing many of their diseases. But this group is different: ten people come as a group, with the same illness, the same need, the same request.

They had a “skin disease.” Most Bible translations refer to them as “lepers” but scholars agree that it’s unlikely they were suffering from Hansen’s disease (as leprosy is now known). The word Luke uses seems to be a general term that could refer to any of various skin diseases that were perhaps disfiguring, believed to be contagious, and deemed “ritually impure” – that is, rendering those afflicted ineligible to take part in religious rites of the community. Contact with

a dead body would make a person ritually impure for a time, for example, as could illness. A chronic disease, as some skin conditions are, would mean long-term exclusion, not just from the rituals of their faith but from the social and economic life of their community or even from their families. So in this place on the margins, Jesus encounters these people who are also on the margins.

But what's really interesting is that the group of ten includes both Jews and at least one Samaritan – people from both sides of this cultural divide. It seems that their shared suffering, the fact all of them were outcasts from their own communities, outweighed their other differences and brought them together. We do know, don't we, that suffering changes our perspective on what matters? Maybe that was the case for these folks.

I wonder their solidarity helped them come up with the plan and the courage to seek out Jesus. We know how powerful community can be in enabling healing. These folks come to Jesus with one voice: "Have mercy on us!" they say. Jesus doesn't touch them or perform any healing ritual; he initiates a healing process for all ten of them by simply saying, "Go show yourselves to the priests." He knows, you see, that it's the exclusion from community that's the deepest suffering here – and the authority to end that ostracism was in the hands of the priests. They go, apparently without question, and somewhere along the way, they discover that their skin disease is healed. Ten people healed at one time!

Which brings us to the part of the story we think we know: one of them comes back to say "thank you" to Jesus. "And he was a Samaritan," Luke tells us. Jesus asks (I presume he's talking to his disciples travelling with him?) "Where are the other nine? Is it only this foreigner who has come back to give praise to God?"

Jesus' question is another kind of odd thing about this story, isn't it? Where are they? He knows where they are; presumably they are doing exactly what he asked them to do – going to present themselves, their restored and healthy bodies, to the priests.

I'm not sure that it's fair to conclude that those other nine were ungrateful for their healing. We all have probably experienced that "it's just so good not to be sick" joy after an illness – isn't that what "grateful" feels like? For these folks, it meant an end to isolation and deprivation as well as relief from disease. Of course they must have been eager to be restored to their families, their community, their lives. But I can't believe they didn't feel grateful, or they forgot that it was Jesus who set them on the path to healing.

I don't think we can say, either, that they were without faith. They had at least enough faith to do what Jesus told them to do. They would have understood that the "right" place to give thanks to God, perhaps with a special offering, was at the temple, and likely assumed that's what Jesus expected them to do before returning to their normal responsibilities.

But the tenth person is different, in more ways than one, and Jesus sees that.

We don't know why he stops and comes back to thank Jesus. It could be that as a Samaritan, he wasn't heading to the same priests for confirmation of his healing as the Jews who were healed, but to the central site of worship for the Samaritan community. If that was the case, if he was by himself, apart from the group, he might have been less caught up in the collective celebration. But for whatever reason, he seems to have understood more deeply than the others, seen more clearly – the significance of Jesus, the presence of God, the transformative power that suddenly blossomed in this marginal place, the enormity of what had happened to him. It seems to have laid a call on him that doesn't just involve returning to his former life. It's as if he can't help but deviate from the conventionally faithful thing he's "supposed" to do, and so he runs back and falls at Jesus' feet. When Jesus says to him, "Your faith has made you healed, well, saved, whole" (the word can have any or all of those meanings), he's recognizing that this person has been changed inside as well as out.

The other nine are still healed. Imagine what that did for them, for their families, for their community! An abundance of healing came from this encounter in this out-of-the way place. That's an everyday thing really – God giving so much more than we fully appreciate. But the rarer thing is to really see it for the grace that it is and be changed by it.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus elevates that kind of faith about the merely dutiful religion that he saw in so many people. Jesus often goes out of his way (and so does Luke) to point out, as he does here, that often it's somebody his community considers an outsider who displays true faith, who can see more clearly what God is doing, who recognizes Jesus, who does what's right. This story, like Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan and his words at the beginning of his ministry, is an admonition to religious "insiders."

This story is a reminder that God's grace knows no boundaries or borders, that Jesus cares nothing for the arbitrary lines we draw between us and others, and that the good news is often best understood and most clearly proclaimed by those who might be considered the most unlikely messengers.

It invites us to see differently, more deeply, more (maybe) as Jesus would see. It invites us to ministry that's unconstrained by borders and boundaries and barriers as Jesus' ministry was. It invites us to go beyond just doing what we think is expected of us. It invites us to be brave. It invites us to take a leap of faith, to color outside the lines, to sing and dance, to not hold back – there are probably a dozen ways to describe a faith that is more than words and obedience and conformity.

The story of the healed one who didn't exactly follow Jesus' instructions invites us to be amazed at God's grace. To fall down in worship and to go on our way healed and whole. It invites us - wherever and whoever we are - to faith that truly transformative. Amen.

#### Resources:

Commentaries on Luke 17:11-19 by David Lose and Eric Baretta, at [workingpreacher.com](http://workingpreacher.com)