

Sermon for 10-13-19
Scriptures -- 2 Kings 5:1-15, Luke 17:11-19
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Jose Ramirez, Jr. couldn't remember a time when he wasn't sick. He was one of 13 siblings growing up in Laredo, Texas in the 50s and 60s, and his life was a constant cycle of mysterious ailments and doctor visits. His symptoms would disappear for short periods, but they always came back, often with a vengeance. The doctors had no answers for Jose's worried parents -- no diagnosis that fit, no treatments to offer. Shortly after he graduated high school, Jose and his parents traveled across the border into Mexico, to consult a traditional folk healer called a *curandero*. Jose didn't expect much (after all, none of the highly educated doctors had been able to help him). But for Jose's parents, this was their last hope, the only stone still unturned. They desperately wanted to understand what was happening to their son, why he could never stay healthy for very long.

The *curandero* looked over Jose's body, listened to his story, and said "You have a disease of the Bible."

Leprosy, also known as Hansen's Disease, may seem like an artifact of the ancient past to most of us (although it still exists today in places like India and Bangladesh). But in the Holy Land, during the time of Jesus, the threat of leprosy was real, and terrifying. The word "leprosy" was used to describe a variety of serious conditions that shared certain characteristics in common: affecting the skin, outwardly visible, highly contagious, and (in that time) incurable. Persons

with leprosy were isolated and impoverished, abandoned by family and neighbors, reduced to begging on the street (always from a safe distance, of course). They were untouchables.

And yet Jesus does not seem to fear the 10 who approach him. Perhaps it is not in the nature of a truly righteous person to fear a human being in pain, no matter how different they might be. After all, Jesus seems to take great pleasure in hanging around the kinds of strange places, the no man's lands, where these inappropriate encounters are most likely to happen. It could be in the land of the Gerasenes, or by a well in Samaria, or even in the home of a notorious sinner... you know the kinds of neighborhoods where you make sure to lock your car doors before driving through? Well, Jesus doesn't lock his doors. And he doesn't just drive through, either -- he meets people, and talks with them, and learns about their lives and their needs and their hopes and their dreams. Jesus stays awhile in each of these scary, inappropriate places; and I imagine he leaves a bit of himself - his love, his mercy, his blessing -- in each of those places when he continues on his way.

Back to this story: Luke tells us that this encounter happens "on the way to Jerusalem," in "the region between Samaria and Galilee."ⁱⁱ Only problem is, there is no region between Samaria and Galilee.ⁱⁱⁱ Just a border, a dividing line between familiar and strange, between good and bad, between holy and unclean. Naturally this place, which others might avoid (and where we might lock our car doors), is exactly where Jesus goes.

Think of the courage it must have taken for those ostracized men to call out: "Jesus, master, have mercy on us!" And Jesus sees them, he encounters them, he speaks to them... I wonder - how long had it been since a healthy person engaged with these men instead of averting their eyes and moving quickly past? How shocking, to be acknowledged as a fellow human being, after being shunned and shamed and isolated for so long!

Jesus doesn't only heal them of their illness -- that alone would be miraculous, that would be enough. It's as if these men have been trapped alone inside an empty fortress called leprosy, and Jesus is the mighty force that tears down the walls isolating them from the world they once knew. This is more than physical healing. This is dignity, and reconciliation, and restoration to wholeness!

Remember Jose Ramirez, Jr., who was diagnosed with leprosy by the Mexican *curandero*? At age 20, he was taken from Laredo to Carville, Louisiana in a hearse (believe it or not) for residential treatment at a state-run leprosarium. It may sound frightening, but Jose actually enjoyed his time there. He made deep and lasting friendships, and his condition improved drastically once he began receiving the proper treatments.

His most moving experience from those first few years after diagnosis occurred during a holiday visit back to his parents' home in Texas. Hansen's disease can be transmitted through saliva; and although the risk of infecting another person is very small if you're in treatment (as Jose was), he didn't want to take any chances or make anyone in his family nervous. So he got up early one morning, and went

downstairs to the kitchen. He set aside one plate, one glass, and one of each kind of cutlery, and began labeling them with his name, to keep them separate from the rest of the family's tableware.

In the radio interview I heard, 60-something-year-old Jose choked up while describing what happened next. His mother was on the other side of the kitchen, making tortillas. She came over to see what he was doing. When Jose explained himself, and moved aside to show her, his mother looked him in the eye, lifted up the plate he'd labeled with his name, and smashed it on the floor.

And there it was -- Jose's other-ness, his separation, his shame, shattered into so many tiny pieces, shattered by the fierceness of his mother's love. Jose still had Hansen's Disease, but he would not be set apart as a leper in his mother's house.

What Jose's mother did to that plate is what Jesus did to the isolation of the 10. It's holy breaking, divine destruction. This is how we know we are in the presence of God -- when shame is erased, when wholeness is restored, when relationships are built across boundaries and barriers. When that which was separated in fear is brought together, in love.

Christ is the one who saves us from all that would divide and demean us. We have become experts at separation, haven't we? We're so good at drawing lines between "us" and "them," and using those lines to determine who is worthy of our time, our consideration, our respect. These dividing lines may make perfect sense to us, because they tell us who we can trust and who we should fear... but

no one ever accused Jesus of being sensible, or proper, or really good at following rules. Jesus lived according to a higher law.

And Jesus shows us a better way to live -- **together**. This is the reconciling work of the Great Physician, the One who dwells in the spaces between "us" and "them," who calls us to reach out in faith across all our dividing lines. If we are courageous, and determined, and faithful enough to answer his call, then perhaps someday we will hear him whisper words of our mutual liberation: "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."^{iv}

ⁱ from NPR.org - "Author Recounts His 'Journey With Leprosy'" aired on *All Things Considered* on 2-1-2009

ⁱⁱ Luke 17:11

ⁱⁱⁱ Dennis Sanders in *The Christian Century's* "Living By The Word" column, on 9-25-19

^{iv} Luke 17:19 NRSV