

Lord, make these words Your Word, that our hearts may become Your heart. Amen.

Who here had to write thank you notes when you were a child? Who still does?
I am terrible – my road to hell is paved with a thousand Intended thank you notes
written in my head and never gotten to paper or email.

When I was young, I always thought that was the point of this gospel story:

Be sure to say thank you. And that is part of it – but it goes so much deeper.

This story shows that gratitude is so much more than a social obligation –
Gratitude is the seed bed of joy. I once asked how to get joy and was told to
cultivate gratitude. It opens our hearts to relationship, and healing, and freedom.

This encounter takes place in an in-between land: *On the way to Jerusalem
Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.*

Galilee was Jesus’ home territory – where Nazareth is, and Capernaum,
where he stayed whenever he was not on the road.

And Samaria is where “those Samaritans” live, those “not-quite-Jews.” Samaria
was once considered part of Israel, the northern kingdom, as we heard in our story
from the Hebrew Bible. Elisha was a prophet in Samaria. But by Jesus’ time the
estrangement was so complete, he refers to the Samaritan man as “this foreigner.”
So we might call Galilee Home Base, and Samaria the land of the “Other.”

The places between are often places where we find God is.

Those who consider ourselves followers of Christ are always, in a sense,
on the way to Jerusalem, focused on God’s mission of transforming the world.

We are also called walk in that in-between place,

between home-base and other-land. We can’t be too rooted in home-base.

Most churches I know describe themselves with words like “family,” “community,”

“warm,” “welcoming.” I’d like to hear us describe ourselves as “explorers,”

“adventurers,” or “missionaries,” “bold,” “edgy,” “going to the margins.”

Because I believe so passionately that that is where Jesus is calling us to be
and where we become more like Jesus.

And how do we get to be more like Jesus?

We can start by learning from this Samaritan leper. This man is outside our
comfort zones. Think of someone you would not want to interact with.

And yet I think he is among the best models for us in the whole New Testament.

If he was here to tell us his story, it might sound like this:

I was pretty much an outsider. Outcast, is more like it. Only I wore two outcast labels – one said “Samaritan,” which meant that the Jewish people considered me the scum of the earth; and the other said, “Leper,” which meant that nobody wanted me near them. Even the other lepers shunned me for being a Samaritan. But they let me hang around with them, the other nine. Beggars can’t be choosers, as they say. We did okay – people fed us, most of the time. If we did our part – let people know we were unclean, kept them from “defiling” themselves by contact with us, they left us alone.

But no one had much hope in it, you know? Until we heard about this guy, this preacher/healer guy. We heard amazing stories about him healing lame people, blind people – why not lepers? So when he came through our territory, close enough to shout at, we did: “Jesus! Master! Have mercy on us!”

He didn’t touch us – but he came close,, looked at us real intense. Then he just said, “Go and show yourselves to the priest.” That’s the only way someone with a skin disease could be certified as “clean” in our law, if the priest checked you over. But we weren’t clean... or were we? Because as we walked toward the temple, I happened to look down at my hand, and the wounds weren’t there, and my skin was like, new... all pink. I checked out my arm and it was completely clean. I said, “Hey!” but about then all the rest of them noticed too. We could see each other’s faces, there were no sores for the first time. So we all just start running, as fast as we can, to get to the priests, get certified as clean so we could go back to our lives, you know? We wouldn’t be outcasts anymore.

And suddenly I think... wait a minute. Where am I going? What do I need with a temple priest – I want to talk to that guy. I need to say thank you to him. I need what he’s got. So I run like crazy the other way, till I see him, and then I run up to him and all I can do is throw myself down in front of him and say, “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” It didn’t matter if I was a Samaritan and him a Jew, or me a leper and him not... he didn’t just give me a new skin; he gave me a new life.

Here are some of the ways this guy is a model for us: he’s not afraid to ask for help. “Have mercy on me!” It goes against our self-sufficient grain to ask for help. The more resources we have, the less comfortable we are asking for help.

Certainly, the other leper in our readings today was like that – Naaman, the Syrian army commander, was willing to travel to Israel to meet with this man of God. But when Elisha prescribed a ridiculously simple “treatment”, he was ready to bail. Only his servants persuaded him to try it. And he too saw new skin. He recognized God’s hand. He too found a new heart as well as a new skin. He found a new life. Drawing nearer to God so that we can be loved into transformation starts with asking for help, aware of our needs, asking for mercy. What do you want to ask God for? Maybe something you ask every time you pray; maybe something you’ve never dared to speak aloud. What would you holler out to Jesus for if he strolled by here?

The second way this Samaritan leper is a model for us is in his awareness of God. He doesn’t just focus on the skin-deep, the healing – he sees beyond it to the deeper spiritual reality in Jesus. He doesn’t confuse the gift with the Giver. He could have kept going, like the other nine who were healed. They ran back to resume the lives. They were only focused on the temporal. But God is about healing the whole person, if we let him.

I also love how this Samaritan is so extravagant in his thanks and praise to God. He turned around and went back to the place where he’d been degraded and abused. *He turned back, praising God with a loud voice; he threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him.* How excited did this man have to be to go running up to a Jewish rabbi and throw himself at his feet, in pure abandon, shouting his thanks and praise? We could afford to be more exuberant in our praises too, Episcopalian as we may be. What would that look like?

And God used that: His healing was a huge sign to Jesus’ disciples and followers that God’s power and love extend even to the “unclean” and the unpopular. Jesus healed people physically as a sign of the deeper healing he could offer. I once was involved in inner healing prayer with someone who was profoundly depressed. Inner healing is something you do over a period of weeks or months, to get at old wounds and traumas. Over the months we prayed with her we learned she had a lot of trauma from childhood, and one day in particular a deep wound surfaced, which we prayed about, and I felt something had snapped open. That day I also saw wounds on her hands; I wondered if they were self-inflicted. The whole session I felt we should pray for her hands to be healed, that that would be an outer sign of the inner healing. But I wondered if it was God or my ego.

Finally I asked about it, and she said, “Oh, this is a fungus I get every summer. It’ll go away after a few weeks.” I said, “Can we pray for it to be healed?”

My prayer partner looked at me like I was nuts, but we went ahead.

Two weeks later, I saw her at church and she said, “Oh Kate, after we prayed that day my whole interior landscape changed. It was like the sun came out.

I couldn’t even find the critical voice that so dominated me. I’ve applied for a job, and I’m moving out of my parents house. It’s all changed. It’s amazing.”

“And what about your hands?” I asked. “Oh, they were cleared up the next day.

I’ve always had that fungus for weeks, but my hands and feet were clear.”

I couldn’t believe she’d taken two weeks to tell me that! But more important, what God had promised had come to pass – the outer healing was a sign that the healing of her heart and mind and spirit was happening.

Like my friend, Jesus gave this man a gift of eternal life. He turns to the man at his feet, and says to him, “*Rise and go your way. Your faith has made you well.*”

The word that is translated here as “made you well” can also be translated as “saved you.” In Greek, healing and salvation are the same word.

In this story, that particular word is only addressed to this one leper who returns.

The other nine received a healing of the body, but salvation – wholeness of body, mind and spirit - is to be found in the One who is God.

In His salvation is healing – healing of the body and spirit, healing of the wounds of the heart, healing of social barriers and prejudice, healing from the fear.

In His salvation is a new identity for each one of us, built upon our truest selves, but new and healed and belonging. In a way, we enact this story every Sunday.

Compared to God’s holiness, we are as “unclean” as a leper. But Jesus has made us clean, worthy to stand before God. Our Lord has lifted us out of the dust, too.

He says, “Come, enjoy the fullness of healing. Come, be in relationship with me.”

And so we come here, we kneel. We say, “Lord, have mercy.” We hear of God’s great love for us and forgiveness. And then we say “thank you,” exuberantly.

The word eucharist means “Thanksgiving,” or “Thank you.” We may not throw ourselves in the dust, but we kneel in our Episcopalian way. We receive Christ’s life.

And then we say thank you again – today, when we get to the Prayer after

Communion, hear it in a new way, the humility and gratitude in those words:

You have graciously accepted us as living members of your Son our

Savior Jesus Christ... send us now into the world in peace.”

And out we go, to extend that love and life to the strangers and outcasts we meet.

Amen.

Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. 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. And he was a Samaritan. 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?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel."