

I've always had a heart for outcasts, because in my own small way, I know what it's like to be one. I'm guessing you do too. If you think about your life, surely there's some point at which you didn't fit in, in which you were left out of the inner circle. While this experience hurts, there's also a hidden gift to exclusion, which if we are able to receive becomes something like a superpower. When you've been excluded, suddenly you learn how painful it is, and that pain allows you to connect to other people. You learn something that you might otherwise never learn, and that creates empathy. You realize that all of us in one way or another have been wounded, and all of us need mercy. If you haven't had this experience, then this may sound strange, but you are missing out. There is a necessary pain we must all go through if we are to know the power of inclusion. May we all be so blessed as to know the pain of being outcast.

In our passage today, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem along the border between Samaria and Galilee. It's often on the borders, the margins, the liminal spaces where we encounter the divine. While he's in this liminal space, Jesus is approached by 10 men suffering from skin diseases. Whatever their illness was, their sickness likely kept from normal human contact. To keep the community safe, the sick sometimes have to bear their suffering alone. Over the past few years, many of us have learned the pain of quarantine. There's a reason that isolation is the worst punishment humans have devised. We are not meant to be alone. Thankfully, these 10 people found each other. Their illness connected them, and that can be a beautiful thing, but still, they want more from their lives, so they cry out to Jesus from a distance saying, "Jesus, Master, show us mercy!"

Mercy. I love that word. We all need mercy, don't we? No matter who you are or what your story is, everyone needs mercy, though perhaps we don't all realize it. These men know it, and they aren't ashamed to ask for it. The Civil Rights lawyer **Bryan Stevenson in his magisterial book, *Just Mercy*, writes:**

There is a strength, a power even, in understanding brokenness, because embracing our brokenness creates a need and desire for mercy, and perhaps a corresponding need to show mercy. When you experience mercy, you learn things that are hard to learn otherwise. You see things you can't otherwise see; you hear things you can't otherwise hear. You begin to recognize the humanity that resides in each of us.

These men knew their brokenness. In fact, their brokenness bonded them together and created in them a desire for mercy. We don't know how they found out about Jesus, but they do, and they cry out for what they need, which is mercy. Normally, when Jesus heals people, he calls them over. He often touches them, but not this time. He changes things up and says, "'Go, show yourselves to the priests.' As they left, they were cleansed." Why does he send them to the priests? The book of Leviticus teaches that when someone has a skin disease, they cannot be restored to the community until a priest inspects them and declares them clean. Jesus tells them to go to the priest so they might be declared clean. But they weren't clean yet, were they? Jesus tells them to go without having yet been healed. They go as an act of faith, trusting in that which they do not yet see.

As they go, somehow, somehow, they were all made clean—an abundant gift of grace. I wonder how often healing happens like this in our lives. We walk by faith, trusting in what we

do not yet see, and along the way, in the liminal space, we realize, I'm healed! I don't know when or how it happened, but it did. Somehow, I forgave that person. Somehow, my resentment toward him is gone. I'm healed, and I didn't even know it. Sometimes healing takes place in a moment with a clear before and after. Sometimes it takes place when we didn't even notice, but whenever healing comes to us, it is always an act of God's grace. Psalm 103 says, "Let my whole being bless the Lord and never forget all God's good deeds: how God forgives all your sins, heals all your sickness." Our God is a healing God, and healing isn't just about cured bodies, is it? It's about inclusion in the community of God, belonging to the human race.

In this account, ten are healed, but only one returns. Only one burst forth in praise for the healing he had received. Only one fell in gratitude at Jesus' feet and said, thank you! Only one, and he was a Samaritan. Samaritans you will recall were considered heretics by the Israelites. They were of the wrong race and wrong religion. This man was an outcast among outcasts, yet he is the only one who responds to the grace he received with gratitude. **Karl Barth wrote: "Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder lightning."** This is the proper relationship between grace and gratitude, and yet so many of us receive the lightning of grace and do not follow it with our thunder of gratitude. In this story, 90% receive grace, but only 10% respond with gratitude, and Jesus takes note that it's the outcast who gets it: "Weren't ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? No one returned to praise God except this foreigner? Get up and go. Your faith has healed you."

Jesus takes special notice that this man was a Samaritan. He doesn't overlook this difference. He highlights and celebrates it. In our time, when it comes to issues of healing and inclusion, we often hear people say, "Why do you have to point out that people are different? Shouldn't we all just be recognized as people? Why focus on how people of color and queer people have been excluded from our community and from our church? Doesn't pointing out the difference just divide us more?" I bet many of you have heard this said before. Perhaps you've said it. But in this passage and throughout the scriptures, differences are recognized and honored. Being a Samaritan mattered to Jesus. He didn't overlook that difference, but instead highlighted it and celebrated it. As a community, we need to decide if we will follow Jesus in this way or follow our culture instead? Will we celebrate differences or pretend like they don't exist? If we were to start a hashtag from this passage, perhaps it would be #Samaritanlivesmatter. Saying this doesn't diminish the importance of Israelite lives, any more than #Blacklivesmatter diminishes the lives of white people. Difference isn't overcome in the kingdom of God. It is recognized, honored, and included.

You have to wonder why the Samaritan responded in gratitude and the other nine did not. Could it be that there are spiritual advantages to being an outcast? I think there are. There are perks to being a wallflower. Of course, it hurts to be excluded, but there are hidden blessings as well. Being an outcast allows you to see things the majority do not see, to understand what others miss, to show mercy where others might judge. That's what Bryan Stevenson means when he says, "When you experience mercy, you learn things that are hard to learn otherwise. You see things you can't otherwise see; you hear things you can't otherwise hear. You begin to recognize the humanity that resides in each of us." That's what church did for me. When I was an outcast at school, it was my church that embraced me and healed me. In fact, it was only after I experienced the mercy of belonging at church that I felt a call to

ministry. For me, ministry is grounded in gratitude of being welcomed as an outcast. That's why welcome and inclusion matters so much to me. It's not incidental. It's central to everything the church does.

Jesus says to the Samaritan, "Get up and go. Your faith has healed you." That word heal is "*sozo*" in Greek. It's the same word as salvation. That's why some translations say, "your faith has saved you." God's healing grace is given to all ten in this story, and it's given to all of us as well, but we don't all recognize it, do we? It's only when we see the gift we've been given, when we recognize the mercy of inclusion that we are saved. We are saved from ingratitude and insecurity. We are saved from prejudice and hate. When we see it, we begin to recognize the humanity that resides in each of us. Recognizing our humanity does not overlook our differences. Instead, it honors and celebrates them. We are saved when we do the same.