

“The Untouchables”

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c; Luke 17:11-19

From Tijuana on the Pacific Ocean to Matamoros on the Gulf of Mexico is 1,954 miles of border separating the United States from Latin America. A 10 to 15 foot wall demarcates parts of this line. Helicopter landing strips used during the first Iraqi War were recycled in 1994 by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to construct this wall. The hope of INS (at that time) was to stem of flow of mainly Mexican immigrants through the San Diego area and Nogales, Arizona.

But (as we know) the flow continues, now with refugees mostly from Central America, through miles of hazardous desert terrain where many fall victim to the elements. This artificial line, however, is more than just a border between countries. Some have called it a scar caused by *the first and third worlds chafing against each other*.

You see, the military might of the United States created the present 1,954 mile long line at the end of the Mexican-American War (1846-1848). After the creation of this line, Mexicans living north of the line woke up to find themselves in a new country. In effect, it was the *border* that crossed these Mexicans.

The same was true for Puerto Ricans who found their island absorbed into the emerging American empire. Like the Mexicans, they were crossed by U.S. borders with the conclusion of the Spanish-American War (1898).

And, of course, to live on the borders can literally mean living in the cities that are along this artificial line. But the borderlands are more than a geographical reality; they also symbolize the *existential reality* of the majority of U.S. Latina/os. Most Hispanics, regardless of where they are or how they or their ancestors found themselves in the United States, live on the borders.

In fact, *borders* separating Latina/os from other Americans exist in every state, every city, and almost every community, regardless of how far they may be from the actual 1,954 miles of border. As theologian Miquel A. De La Torre has said: *“Borders are as real in Topeka, Kansas; Seattle, Washington; or Chapel Hill, North Carolina, as they are in Chula Vista, California; Douglas, Arizona; or El Paso, Texas. To be a U.S. Hispanic is to live constantly on the border, that is, the border that*

*separates privilege from disenfranchisement, power from marginalization, and whiteness from "colored." Most U.S. Hispanics, regardless of where they live, exist in the borderlands."*¹

I share this with you, because in our Gospel reading for today, we find Jesus *on the borders*, traveling between Samaria and Galilee (v. 11).

You see, before the advent of modern medicine there were *leper colonies* on the edges of towns, where the rest of society kept them for fear of contagion. But Luke tells of ten lepers who hoped against hope for healing from the dread disease that ate away at their bodies and consumed their souls. When they heard that Jesus the miracle worker was nearby, they came as close as they dared and called out. Jesus told them to go to the priests, and along the way they found themselves healed.

Often we focus on *the one man* who came back as an illustration of healing, faith, worship and salvation in the life of the individual. *But* there's an equally interesting undercurrent. *Why did Jesus send the lepers to the priests? Why not heal them on the spot?* I think the answer has to do with *prejudice*, and the way we exclude people from society.

In first-century Israel, priests not only diagnosed leprosy, but also declared a leper ritually unclean. By sending the ten to the *priests*, Jesus raised the possibility that they would not only be *healed* but also declared *pure*, which was essential if they were to reintegrate into society. *The twist in the tale is that this particular leper colony was near a village on the **border** between Galilee and Samaria, communities that were acrimoniously divided.* Jews considered all Samaritans ritually unclean and would travel miles out of their way to avoid having any contact with them.

Stigmatization (of course) *is a great leveler*: while they were *ill* the ten lepers had discovered **that** which side of the border you were from *meant nothing* if you had leprosy. These ten lepers had become *untouchables* and had forged their own community *on the margins*.

¹ Miguel A. De La Torre, *Preaching God's Transforming Justice*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2012, pp. 423, 424

But once they were *healed*, the old divisions kicked into play again. *Ten were healed, but only nine would be accepted; the tenth would always be unclean because he was a Samaritan.* He knew that barriers to joining society on the *Galilean side of the border* ran far deeper than leprosy. Perhaps that's why he didn't bother with the priests but turned back to find Jesus.

Note that it was only to the *Samaritan* that Jesus said, "*Your faith has made you well.*" Maybe Jesus was talking about a different kind of wellness. Maybe he meant that *deep-seated* human divisions are a much more serious malady than even leprosy—that our souls can be *far sicker* than our bodies and yet most of us do nothing to heal the breach. Maybe he wasn't commenting on the attitude of the nine *who didn't return* as much as on *the system* that would accept them and reject the Samaritan.

We'll never know exactly what Jesus meant. But the *challenge* to our concept of the *gospel and faith and healing* is that they are not merely gifts for the individual but *bring consequences and responsibilities*. Jesus healed with compassion and generosity, but he also drew people's attention from their own problems *to the bigger picture*. We are healed not to stay the same, but to live differently, *breaking down divisions in society that exclude people because of their nationality, gender, religion or education*.

Ask yourself: *Where* do we place borders that cannot be crossed? *Whom* do we think of as untouchable because they come from cultural and religious backgrounds that we fear or despise through ignorance or misinformation?

"Where are the nine?" asked Jesus. The nine were right back where they came from, safely on the right side of the border, healed of their exterior problems but locked back into their prejudices. *Only one, through faith, became well in the broader sense of the word, realized his freedom and walked away from prejudice².*

In her book *Out of Africa* the Danish author Karen Blixen (writing under the pen name Isak Dinesen) tells the story of a young Kikuyu boy named Kitau who appeared at her door in Nairobi one day to ask if he might work for her. She hired him on the spot. Kitau served her household so admirably that she was stricken when, after just three months, he asked for a letter of recommendation

² Maggi Dawn, *The Untouchables*, The Christian Century, October 2, 2007

to a Muslim in Mombasa named Sheik Ali. Since Blixen did not want to lose Kitau, she offered to increase his pay, but he was firm in his desire to leave.

He had decided that he was going to become either a Christian or a Muslim, he explained to her. His whole purpose in coming to live with her had been *to see the ways and habits of Christians up close*. Next he would go to live with Sheik Ali for three months to see how Muslims behaved. *Then* he would make up his mind.

Aghast, Blixen wrote: “I believe that even an Archbishop, when he had these facts laid before him, would have said, or at least thought, as I said, ‘*Good God, Kitau, you might have told me that when you came here!*’”

The fact that Kitau was weighing the *habits* of Christians—and not their beliefs—is relevant, since on the whole *Jews* (and by analogy, Jesus—a Jew) are less interested in *beliefs* than (we) Christians are. Jewish identity hinges on *how one lives, not what one thinks*. Which begs the questions:

How does being Christian change the way we live?

What’s the hardest part about loving our neighbor as ourselves?

“*We done is better than well said*,” reads a country church sign. It is a teaching that Jews and Christians have in common, though Christians often need reminding that *our beliefs* are just things we say *unless* they lead to things we actually *do*.³

Or, as Madeline L’Engle put it: “*We do not draw people to Christ by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.*”

Barbara Brown Taylor has said that “*when she first started looking for the Jewish equivalent to the Nicene Creed (one of the earliest statements of Christian belief), she learned that there is no mandatory set of beliefs for Jews.*”⁴

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy*, Harper One, New York, NU, 2019, pp. 93, 94

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 95

Taylor continued: “A famous twelfth-century rabbi named Maimonides came up with thirteen *principles* of Jewish faith, but there is nothing binding about them. What is binding, for Jews who choose to be bound, is *Jewish practice*: how to worship; how to pray; how to conduct business; how to care for the land; how to treat the neighbor; the stranger; the widow; and the orphan. It is all about *relationships*. The closest thing to a Jewish creed is *the Shema*, a combination of three biblical passages that begins with Deuteronomy 6:4: ‘*Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.*’”⁵

Taylor concluded: “As small as the first word of that verse is, it made a big impression on me. What must it be like, I wondered, to put *hearing* God ahead of being *heard*? So many of the prayers in my own tradition are about beseeching God *to hear us*. So much of our *worship* involves *listening* to each other talk and then going out to proclaim the gospel to others. *What do we think will happen if we stop talking?* The Jewish emphasis on *hearing* and *doing* are both curative for me: ‘*Hear, O Barbara! The Lord is your God, even when you are mute!*’”⁶

Friends, recall (from our first reading this morning) that when Naaman (who is also a victim of leprosy) comes before Elisha, the prophet instructs the army commander to bathe *seven times* in the river Jordan. But Naaman is *put off* (v. 12): “*Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the rivers of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?*” His arrogance in thinking *that the rivers back home are superior to those of any foreign land* misses the point that *God is not restricted by geography*. Only by trusting God does Naaman discover the God of all the earth (v. 15).

And hence, the lepers, the borderland inhabitants, and the powerful like Naaman—then and now—learn the same lesson that the psalmist proclaims: “*Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them*” (Ps. 111:2). From the in-between space of borders, the in-between space of crucifixion and resurrection, sometimes the only thing that we can hold on to is the *promise* that *God’s justice endures forever* (v. 3).

⁵ Ibid, p. 95

⁶ Ibid, p. 96