

SERMON

Pastor Cris Frigm

How many of you claim Newark as the place you grew up? How many of you think of Newark as your “home”? How many of you think of Newark as “home for now?” Sometimes it’s easy to understand our place in this world and sometimes it’s a bit more difficult.

The story of healing we hear today comes very much on the margins. Healing comes for 10 men suffering from some type of skin disease. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He’s been on the way to Jerusalem for several chapters at this point, teaching and healing on the way; helping the disciples understand their place in the movement that God is beginning in Jesus; clarifying what God is up to in the communities they visit and in the people they encounter.

But the journey is anything but a straight line. Today, Jesus is in the “region between Samaria and Galilee.” The story is set in a place where home might not be so easy to describe. Conflict was built into the culture of Galilee after generations of invasions and influence from various empires. It was a melting pot of people who claimed different identities and homes. It was cut off from the rest of Judea by the region of Samaria. Those who identified as Jews, the community from which Jesus came, didn’t like Samaritans. In fact, they would define themselves, in part, as **not** the other. Much of their cultural identity was excluding one another aggressively and persistently. This region in which Jesus was traveling had a major identity crisis.

And then we encounter these ten men, who used to simply be called “lepers”. They’re not likely suffering from leprosy, Hansen’s Disease, what we’ve come to understand as a very specific bacterial infection. But these men, whatever their diagnosis, are still people, not a disease. Just as happens so often today, they are defined not by who they are but by their condition. And their condition – that defining characteristic – further pushes them into the “in between place” because they are considered unclean.

They are not allowed to participate in the life of the community. Religious practice and tradition have pushed them out until they become clean and whole again...somehow. For most instances of uncleanliness, there is a ritual to be performed, but if the disease is persistent, if the symptoms cannot be washed away, then the exclusion from the community continues and can be permanent.

As I hear their story, I can’t help but think of all the ways we find ourselves navigating the in-between places of our lives, the ways that we find ourselves navigating

the ins and outs of life as we move from community to community, from culture to culture, from home to home.

As I study history, two contrasting trends play out. One, that we are becoming so much more mobile that we have significantly broader experiences with those who are different from us. Two, that we struggle so hard to understand our own identity at times, that we lean into traditions and cultural understandings that serve to strengthen our sense of us versus them...of defining ourselves as **not** them, like the Jews and the Samaritans.

As we learn one another's stories, there is a dialogue that happens between how we define ourselves and how we connect with those who are different. There is a journey that happens as we navigate our way through the places we go and the different communities we encounter.

In my deployment to Germany in 2021, my work was focused on this journey between stages of life, between realities of different communities, between the past and present understanding of self and togetherness. The mission of the Warrior Transition Program was to take care of sailors who were on their way home from deployments to Southwest Asia and Africa. They came through our base in Germany on their way home, so that they had a chance to decompress and begin to process the journey from active-duty missions to life with their family.

In that place of "in-between" they were given some tools they would need to figure out how to shift from austere environments and challenging work to the everyday choices of "regular" life. We gave them some language to use to understand their transitions. We gave them the chance to practice making good decisions – which they almost always did. We helped them pay attention to what they were experiencing emotionally and spiritually as they went from full-time sailor to civilian and part-time sailor.

I had the chance, personally, to explore my own in-between places as I learned a bit about the history of faith in that part of the world – the theological ancestry to my own faith journey. I had to learn what it meant to be a father and husband while limited to electronically mediated engagement and a significant time difference. All the while, I was seeing these beautiful places and deep history.

The sailors I cared for were facing the very real challenge of returning to a place that might not feel so much like home as when they left. Children had grown. In some cases, marriages were strained to or beyond the breaking point. COVID was still wreaking havoc with our concept of community.

But part of what we tried to teach them, part of what we grounded our process in, was the idea of giving thanks. Returning home to their family – whatever it looked like – would be a profound and important opportunity to give thanks for the ways they had been supported while they were away, for the ways their family had to carry on without them, for the ways that they would be welcomed as they returned home, for the ways they would continue to be blessed by those in their community – whatever it looked like.

Jesus encountered this group of profoundly ill and ostracized men. They cried out for mercy in the hopes that they could return home to communities that had cast them to the margins. Jesus answered their prayer. He sent them on the way to cleanliness with as little fanfare as possible. They were cleaned of their illness while simply on the way.

But one of them, the most marginalized and in-between of all of them, the Samaritan, realized just how much his life had just changed.

In his journey in between sickness and health, he realized the value, the importance, the *significance* of returning to offer thanks. He alone of the ten, comes back to Jesus and throws himself at the feet of Jesus in thanksgiving and praise. He breaks every barrier in front of him to offer a word of profound thanks and praise to the one who had made him clean and whole again.

On that road to Jerusalem, in the middle of all kinds of cultural, geographic, and religious definitions, ten suffering people were healed by Jesus outside an unnamed village on the border between Samaria and Galilee.

By coming back to give thanks, one of them experienced something just a little bit more than being healed. One of them, through faith, became part of a whole new reality – the reality of salvation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. May we live in his example, trust in the same promise, and give thanks for what we have been given. Always. Amen.