

Luke 17:11-19 (New Revised Standard Version)

*11 On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. 12 As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, 13 they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" 14 When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. 15 Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. 16 He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. 17 Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? 18 Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" 19 Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."*

Since today's Gospel story is about lepers and a Samaritan I decided to look up synonyms of those words. I wasn't at all surprised to discover that the meanings of these words have changed a bit over the centuries since these stories were written down. According to Roget's Thesaurus online lepers are considered to be pariah, untouchable, outcast, undesirable, persona non grata, anathema . . . in fact, just about every conceivable word for an undesirable person was listed, including bum and hobo.

The definition of leprosy is a quite bit different today than it was in Jesus' day. What we call leprosy today is Hansen's disease, a serious bacterial disease that causes permanent damage to skin, nerves, limbs, and eyes. Contrary to popular belief, leprosy does not cause limbs to fall off but limbs can become numb and/or diseased as a result of this chronic condition. In biblical times, however, leprosy was a general term for a number of skin diseases and conditions. Generally speaking leprosy would be any condition that would change the color of skin due to disease or infection like acne or psoriasis. These conditions aren't necessarily contagious or permanent, but do serve to set the sufferer apart. According to Leviticus, "The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled: and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean' he shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp." (Leviticus 13:45-46) They weren't particularly hated or feared. They were merely unclean, just as a woman who had just given birth was unclean until she presented herself at the temple with a sacrificial dove for ritual cleansing.

But it doesn't take much to draw the attention of bullies. It just takes a small difference to find yourself singled out. I drew their attention when the school year began in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. I was the new kid **and** I had a broken arm. Luckily, my suffering at their hands was brief. It only lasted as long as I wore a cast and sling, just as a leper's would end

when – if - their skin cleared up.

It would, however, be a **very** bad thing if a leper tried to live within the camp, keeping his condition a secret. THAT could bring on some fairly extreme anger – that would be blatant disobedience of the law. It might even endanger his neighbors. Who knew whether he would try to give it to someone else? . . .

*Imagine what it might have been like for a 15 year old boy who's trying to keep his difference a secret. Maybe his skin discoloration is someplace easily hidden, on his lower back perhaps, or under his loincloth. Imagine his terror of being discovered, of being cast out from his family, his friends, his community of faith for who knows how long. He'd have had no one to turn to, no one to assure him that God loved him no matter what, no one to console him or turn away his fear. Now imagine what he might have to endure if others discovered his sin – not just his disease but also the fact that he tried to keep it secret.*

Think about this boy, this terrified leper, and give him a name. Give him the name of one of those six young men who killed themselves in September. Give him the name of one of those young men who couldn't live with the bullying, who couldn't face any more of the rejection by their neighbors and their church. Give him the name of

**Billy Lucas**, 15, who hung himself on September 9

**Cody Barker**, 17, who killed himself on September 15.

**Seth Walsh**, 13, who hung himself on September 19

**Tyler Clementi**, 18, who jumped off the George Washington bridge on September 22.

**Asher Brown**, 13, who shot himself in the head on September 23.

**Raymond Chase**, 19, who hung himself September 29

Or give him the name of one of the thousands of bullied gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender children who haven't yet been driven to such desperation. . .

This story of the ten lepers is also about a Samaritan. In Roget's thesaurus online the only definition was for "Good Samaritan" and the synonyms were Johnny-on-the-spot, boy scout, do-gooder, good neighbor, helping hand, humanitarian, **none** of which are the way 1<sup>st</sup> century Judeans would have described Samaritans. They would have used the words we use for leper and added words like enemy, heretic, unbeliever and been seriously hateful about the whole thing.

You see, Samaritans were enemies of the very worst kind . . . family members and co-believers who had been through a split in the family that also split the church. If anything they were considered **worse** than Gentiles because during the reign of

Solomon's son Rehoboam they had left the rest of the family, divided the land, raised up their own kings and built their own temple. Samaritans in Judah – well, they **might** have been chased by children with stones or had some one set a dog on them. They could be refused service at a market or inn and most people wouldn't even pay attention.

So here we have ten lepers, nine Jews and one Samaritan traveling together, not fully accepted by each other but brought together because of a common problem. We know what that's like. We've been through that a couple of times in the last several years. 9/11. Hurricane Katrina. The Gulf Oil spill. They're traveling along the edges, living on the edges of society and the geographic edge of their two countries.

And that's where they meet Jesus. On the edge. It seems like that's where he always was. Debating theology with respected scholars of the church and sharing a meal with the homeless on the street. Spending time with the respected and with the cast out. And not as one who just came by to visit, but as one who belongs. . . in both places. . . . on the edges.

And so he healed the lepers and sent them on their way. Nine headed straight to the Temple and the priests so they could be blessed and return to their regular lives. One came back to thank him – the Samaritan. The outcast. The foreigner.

Now, we know that the Samaritan couldn't have gone to the Temple in Jerusalem, nor would he want to. But he could have gone home, been seen by his own priests and then rejoined his family amid much rejoicing. But instead he chose to come back, to fall at Jesus' feet praising God and giving thanks. He came back to show his gratitude to the one who'd had mercy on him, the one who had given him back his life.

*Imagine that 15 year old boy again, and how his life might be if he lived in a community where he was shown mercy. A community that rejected not **him**, but those who mistreated him. A community that refused to look away when it heard reports of bullying but rather treated bullying like the crime it is. A community that refused to be quiet when religious and political leaders castigated and reviled him just because he was different. Imagine what it might be like if he lived in a community that gave him his life back. Imagine what it might be like to **be** that community.*

Bullying is everywhere. Geeks and smart kids and dumb kids and the fashionably challenged and Moslem kids and kids who look like they might be Moslem are bullied and Jewish kids and Christian kids. All these children and more are bullied and live in terror of the next school day. Kids lose their lunch money, watch their homework get trashed, and find themselves victims of beatings and the most horrific "practical jokes"

every day. They feel like they have no where to turn. The schools don't pay attention, their parents are often powerless, or worse, tell them to "man up". And so some of them lose their lives. They commit suicide rather than continue to face the daily torment. If it's that terrible for straight kids, imagine what it must be like for kids who are discovering themselves to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, who live in a country where hate crimes against homosexuals and transgendered persons are on the rise and whose perpetrators seem to be egged on by some religious and political leaders. Imagine being 13 or 15 or 17 or 19 and believing that it probably won't ever get any better. . . .

We **must** not be silent. We must not allow our children to be murdered by hatred. Do not doubt that is what has happened in the cases of these six gay boys in September and in the case of **every** child who commits suicide because of bullying. These children have been murdered as surely as if the bullies had personally pushed them off the bridge or used the rope, the gun, or the pills on them. These children have been murdered by the hatred of the bullies, and they have been murdered by our silence. Whenever, where ever we have heard of bullying and not spoken out, we have become part of the problem.

As Christians, as followers of Jesus, we must **be** like him. We must reach out with mercy to those who live on the margins, on the edges of society. We must speak out against bullying and oppression of every kind and we must stand against those who preach hate. When Jesus said "Love your neighbor" he wasn't talking about having a nice, warm passive feeling about them. He was talking about actively reaching out, loving, feeding, healing, **saving** our neighbor, our children, our enemy. The leper and the Samaritan. The bullied and the bully.

Jesus came as savior of the world. He came to save the world and all the people in it from sin, from hatred, from oppression, from the pain we inflict upon one another. He came armed and armored with Love, the most powerful weapon of all. Let us go from this place using that mighty weapon. And they will know we are Christian by our love.