

Sermon: More Than Skin Deep
Text: Luke 17:11-19
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Context: WWPC
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him.

Luke 17:12

One of the most memorable sermons I've ever heard was focused on this very passage that I've just read.

The preacher was Dr. Robert (Bob) Dykstra, professor of pastoral theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. He offered the sermon at a Chapel service at PTS. He could have chosen any text from the entire Bible for the occasion. But this distinguished professor of pastoral theology chose this passage.

The reason behind Dr. Dykstra's choice became immediately obvious. It's because he had skin in the game.

I'm going to quote the sermon at some length on this point, because he tells his story better than I can:

By mid-adolescence, I had developed an unusually severe, almost textbook case of acne, though one mostly confined to areas on my back and chest and therefore mercifully hidden under my shirt from the gaze of others.

I say 'textbook case' because of a conversation I had with a physician friend years later, at age 27, while working as a chaplain in a hospital.

As we talked one day, I happened to mention to my friend that if I ever were to develop a serious infection, I was sure there would be no antibiotics left to treat me because of a tolerance I had developed after so many years of taking them for acne as a youth.

She asked me which drugs I had taken, and as I went through the list and got to the last and, at the time, most potent, one called Dapsone, she casually remarked 'Oh, the leprosy drug.'

I went to the Physicians' Desk Reference, the drug bible, and looked up Dapsone, and there it was- the primary drug used to treat Hansen's Disease, a contemporary form of leprosy.

Though I had suspected it since early childhood, at 27 a doctor confirmed I was indeed a leper.

Back when I was 16, I cringed one day when my minister casually touched my shoulder, because it hurt. He asked why I flinched. I didn't respond.

He had a long memory however and days later asked if he could see my back. I told him no. He wanted to know why, but again I would not say. We played this game for a while, so great was my shame, until for some reason- perhaps sheer exhaustion but more likely an inner desire to be known- I relented.

We were together in church, in the sanctuary, of all places, when I lifted up my shirt for him. He told me he was sorry I had suffered this alone, that he was proud of me for letting me see, and that he thought it would help for me to see a doctor, which to that point I had not done.

Thus would begin my years of antibiotics and some tangible relief from an embodied source of shame.

Today, of course, a minister's asking an adolescent to lift his shirt in church immediately raises eyebrows...

But this, I think, would be the wrong lesson to draw. There is no question that healing for my own leprosy, not only in its most overt form as acne but in its more invidious expression as shame, began long before I took a single capsule of [antibiotics] . . .

Rather, the great healing came in lifting my shirt before a sufficiently attentive, caring other, and especially in doing so in the safety of 'my Father's house.'

I found with graphic clarity in that particular space and action a God who was as concerned with my body as with my soul. I found acceptance, a sanctuary, for embodied shame.

Go and show yourself to a priest, Dr. Dykstra encouraged us, not by lifting our shirts, of course, especially not in this day in age. But by simply opening up and sharing our pain. Because the truth is we all have things we're hiding.

We've all suffered slights and pains and insults that have left us feeling wounded or hurt or caused us to feel shame—feelings we perhaps continue to internalize to this day. Or maybe we've done things that were so regrettable, so out of character, they continue to haunt us even now.

If so, show yourself to a priest, as Dr. Dykstra encouraged us students to do, as Jesus encouraged those lepers to do. In doing so, you might find that you've started down the path that leads to your healing.

This was a brilliant sermon on its face. But the reason it was so powerful for me is it struck a nerve. Like Bob Dykstra, I suffered from a severe case of acne as a teenager. The difference is that as a starting member of the Belle Fourche Broncs high school basketball team, I could not hide my affliction.

Every time I put on my uniform and took the court, my acne-ravaged shoulders and upper arms were on full display for all the world to see.

I would much rather have simply shown them to a priest. That would have been an easier option for sure, than baring my pock marked skin.

Looking back now, though, many years later, there is one problem with this approach.

Simply put, priests, and ministers, too, are not magic, or infallible. They are, we are, ordinary people, prone to making mistakes just like everyone else.

This point was powerfully driven home to me by my friend Kathryn Cartledge.

Some of you know Kathryn. She and her then partner, Elizabeth Eve, bought Julia and Dick Richards' house on North Lane.

What you may not know is that Kathryn is an ordained UCC minister. In effect she has become a priest herself. Which is really something of a miracle in light of what happened to her. Indeed, the fact that Kathryn is alive at all is its own kind of miracle.

Today, Kathryn calls the United Church of Christ home but growing up she was a Presbyterian, a member of Central Presbyterian in Atlanta, I believe.

Even as a young girl Kathryn knew she was different from the other girls. At the level of her outward appearance, the level of her skin, she just looked different. But she felt different inwardly, too. Less girly girl and, frankly, a little more like a boy.

We've come a long way since those days, when Kathryn was young. Today, even as an out, married lesbian, Kathryn can serve the church as an ordained minister.

And that's not just a benefit to Kathryn, that's a benefit to the church at large. It makes us bigger, and our tent wider. And it just makes us better. Our inclusivity says to the world that we are not, in fact, an institution mired in, say, the 17th century. We are equipped for and responsive to the challenges of the 21st century.

But it hasn't always been that way. When Kathryn was in her teens, she felt like something was wrong with her. So she went to see her pastor, Joanna Adams. Joanna was a young, inexperienced minister at the time. This was back when women themselves, as a class, had only recently won the right to be ordained.¹

Perhaps because of that connection, because Kathryn and Joanna were each in their separate ways members of a class of people that were not wholeheartedly welcomed by the church, Kathryn wound up her courage and showed herself, revealed herself, to Joanna as a lesbian.

She confessed to her minister that she felt like something was wrong with her. In her own words, she had "internalized the cultural distain for me."

In a moment that would change both of their lives, Joanna agreed with her. She told young Kathryn that she did not understand homosexuality, but the one thing she knew for sure is that it fell short of what God intended for her.

¹ Kathryn tells her story in full on *Turning Points*, a DVD produced by the Covenant Network.

In a gesture of extreme vulnerability, Kathryn showed herself to a priest, and the priest pronounced her unclean.

Unsurprisingly, Kathryn left Joanna's office angry and wounded, and in more pain than she felt when she went in.

So she went home and did what far too many LGBTQ youth have done. She picked up a revolver and attempted, as she put it, "to blow the pain away."

I'm glad to report Kathryn did not succeed in her attempt to take her life. And what a mercy that was. She went on to have a long and inspirational career as a pastor and an activist, and is now married to Elizabeth, the love of her life.

I should also point out that Kathryn and Joanna have since reconciled, each sharing their truth, one minister to another, and modeling for everyone who knows their story, an admirable example of grace, sorrow, personal growth and forgiveness.

For my part, I'm glad to call her both a friend and a neighbor. And also my teacher. Kathryn not only taught me how much better and more welcoming the church is with her in an ordained leadership position in it.

She also helped me see something about this passage I had not seen before. Dr. Bob Dykstra helped me understand this text as a healing story, one that was relevant to me.

But Kathryn Cartlidge's experience helped me understand that this is also a teaching story.

Jesus enters a village and is met there by 10 lepers. Ten people who are so unclean they are barred from society and forced to live outside the gates of the city.

Ten completely innocent human beings who were so feared they were forced to wear bells around their necks to warn unsuspecting citizens of their presence, so they can flee from these monsters.

Get anywhere near them and you become unclean yourself and so must spend some time in quarantine, walled off from the wider community. In fairness, in Jesus' day when you came near a leper you also risked contracting the disease yourself, for leprosy is highly communicable, its effects are devastating, and of course at the time it was also untreatable.

So the people's fears weren't entirely groundless. But the part that was so wrong, and so sad, is that this fear was given religious sanction.

Lepers weren't sick. They were unclean. Their skin condition was not the result of an infection; it was an abomination. They deserved to be treated with mercy and compassion and instead they were ostracized, kept closeted away at a safe distance.

So the lepers approach Jesus cautiously, keeping their distance as they are required to do by law. They ask him to have mercy on them. It's a simple request but a profound one, too.

Go and show yourselves to the priest, he replies.

Why does he tell them to do this? Surely he could have healed them on the spot.

What if this act is not just for them, but for the priest? What if he, the priest, also needs to be healed?

Because here's the thing. One of these lepers is so moved, he turns around to say thanks. As it happens he's the worst of the lot. For he has an underlying condition that can't be cured, one that runs much deeper than the surface of his skin, down to the core of this man's identity.

He is a Samaritan. Ethnically he's as unclean as a leper, as reviled as a dog.

Maybe sending him to see the priest had nothing to do with his leprosy and everything to do with his humanity.

Unwittingly the man hands Jesus the perfect teaching moment. "Were not ten made clean?" Jesus asks the crowd who have come to gape at this spectacle. "The other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

It's a startling word, this one. In the language of the day, foreigner happens to be the same word that appears on the "keep out" signs on the inner barrier of the temple, the signs that were meant to preserve the sanctity of the God's house and to prevent it from being defiled by men just like this one.

And it underscores how mean that prohibition is. *Go and show yourself to the priest*, Jesus instructs him. *You are a child of God and you have no cause to be ashamed just because you're a Samaritan.*

Indeed, I'm re-writing these laws as we go along, and I'd love for you to help me with that. Go and show yourself to the priest. And by the way, on your way into the temple, please tear down that silly foreigner sign. For God's house is open to everyone.

A number of years ago I was working on a sermon on this very text when I received an unsolicited email, out of the blue. It came from someone I'll call Jeff.

It seemed that he was planning a move to Asheville. And apparently he had seen our website. *What do you mean when you say your church is inclusive?* he wrote succinctly, furtively.

In light of what happened to Kathryn, it was impossible not to hear the question behind the question, impossible not to feel the fear behind his words.

Would I be safe there in your church? Will I be made to feel welcome or will I be made to feel like a leper?

Will you see me as a beautiful child of God, or will you see me as unclean? Will you treat me like a family member or like a foreigner, like a Samaritan? Will I have to announce my presence to the unsuspecting and the fearful, and will they run from me when they discover who I am?

No, Jeff, you won't have to wear a bell around your neck or hide your identity. Not here. If some of us felt that way at one time, we no longer feel that way. God has changed our hearts, expanded our minds, broadened our theology.

You are welcome to worship with us here in the inner sanctuary, along with the rest of us Samaritans and lepers. For God has transformed us all. And God's house is open to all.

That was several years ago. I'm aware that questions of sexual orientation now seem almost quaint. But that's only because groups like the Covenant Network, along with hundreds of individuals, including many of us in this room, worked hard and steadily to make the church more open and welcoming to all its members.

But this effort to build a church as just and generous as God's grace continues to this day. Because this story about these lepers and this Samaritan man is always true.

And I suspect Jesus will continue to send lepers and Samaritans our way, into this inner sanctum.

Maybe that leper lives inside you, and is longing to feel loved or accepted for who you are, or forgiven and cleansed for something you've done long ago, or last week.

Or maybe that Samaritan is your cousin whom you knew as Cheryl growing up but now goes by Nathan.

Or your neighbor, Frank, who has been a Trump supporter. An economic refugee—a man who lost his job when it was shipped to China, and now, after that tape came out last Friday, he is a political refugee because at heart he is a good and decent man, and he's now looking for a place to call home, where he will be loved and welcomed.

Or maybe its Amal and Sayeed Ahmed, literal refugees—Syrians looking for a place that will welcome them, a place to call home, where they can be safe and raise their two children in a loving, supportive community.

Because this story is always true, over and over again we will get the opportunity to take down that silly foreigner sign, to welcome everyone into this space, this sacred, safe, healing sanctuary, and to say together, all God's children are loved and welcome here.

Amen