

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church  
By Eric Howell  
**"Covenant Day"**  
Luke 17:11-19  
October 10, 2010

In the gospel story, a man pauses to give thanks for the good thing that has happened in his life. Like him, we are thankful today. We say thank you to those who gave life and shape to DaySpring. For your sacrifices, your sensitivity to the Spirit, and your attentiveness to the need, you and all those who came after you would have for a place of peace and rest and community and worship. So we pause today, on Covenant Day, to say thank you.

We also say thank you, like the leper, to God. This is God's work. While some of us had a hugely significant part in making DaySpring what it was and is, and many of us have had small parts in that same journey, we all know this is not simply the result of our work. It is God's work. It's not our church. It is God's church. The leper in the story understood that the healing he experienced was a gift. It was God in him. And likewise, many of us have found healing here. That healing is not to our glory. It's God's salvation in us.

The story of the ten lepers invites us into a nether-region, a place that is no place, a space that is neither here nor there. We go with Jesus passing through the region between Samaria and Galilee. There was no official region between the two. They bordered each other. The space between was more in the people than on the map. Samaritans weren't enemies of Jews. They weren't oppressors, or raiders, or invaders. They were cousins from that part of the family you don't talk about that much, the ones who get invited to Thanksgiving the night before: "Oh, I'm so sorry you can't make it. I thought you knew we were all getting together. Well, maybe next year." They were half-breeds, the leftovers from the Assyrian conquest, generations prior. The Assyrians took into exile all the young strong men, all the capable leaders, all the thinkers, producers, warriors, and all of those who would contribute to society. The Samaritans were pretty much the descendents of those who were left behind and intermarried with the few Assyrians who moved in.

The thing is that the Samaritans felt the same way about the Jews. It was a mutual disdain. "Oh, I'm so sorry you are all getting together for Thanksgiving. We just can't make it. We, uh, have some other plans. Maybe we'll all get together next Christmas." It was a mutual aversion.

So when Jesus travels through the region between Galilee and Samaria, He's in a no-man's land, a space between you and me, a place ceded to no one in particular, a space in transition.

Is it any surprise that there He meets the only people who would call that place home -- a group of lepers of both Jews and Samaritans. Those old divisions didn't matter anymore. Lepers didn't belong here or there. They didn't belong anywhere. They were outcasts, isolated from the community. Leviticus 13 and 14 dictate that if a person has a skin disease like this, they are to be sent out from the camp to live alone until, and if, they are ever

healed of their disease. A leper had to tear his clothes and if he did see anyone, he had to shout out a warning, "Unclean! Unclean!"

What was abandoned as isolated, lonely, hopeless space, in the hands of grace, becomes a place pregnant with gospel possibilities. It's liminal space. Liminal space or time is that which is full of ambiguity, vagueness, and transition. It's not always a bad thing; quite the opposite. In liminal space we often grow, discover, and transform. It is often the space in our lives for greatest reflection on what was and deepest dreaming for what might be, but mostly it is the place to be present to what is. Liminal space is that time between the moment you turn in your last exam your senior year and the graduation ceremony. There's no feeling like that feeling of those few days. You are suspended between the "was" and the "will be able to see," both, but not living fully in either. Liminal space is that moment just after he, on one knee, asks, "Will you marry me?" and before she gives her answer. Ladies, as special as that moment is, as long as you would like to live in that moment and relish it, know that he is in torture. Everything hangs in the balance: all the reflection on "what was," all the hopes for "what will be;" the best of himself -- the insecurities within him. All of it is right there. Please don't wait. Give the boy an answer.

Liminal space is those few suspended moments when the desperate game-winning, half-court shot is up in the air, just as the buzzer sounds and the lights on the scoreboard turn red. The ball has left the fingers of the shooter. All is done. How will it all finish?

The term liminal space, which I've suggested for both the geography of the region between Galileans and Samaritans, and for the experience of living in transition, comes from the Latin *limen* which means threshold. A threshold is the space between, that transitions one kind of space to another kind of space: outside/inside -- living room/bedroom. It doesn't divide the spaces. That's a wall. It doesn't protect one space from another. That's a door. A threshold, a *limen*, is both "what was" and "what will be," both here and there. Not a divider or a protector, it is an invitation.

The narthex through which we pass into the sanctuary is a threshold -- a place of transition and movement that is neither fully outside nor fully inside. As we move through it each Sunday, we are transitioned from individuals -- long-timers, new visitors, into a worshipping body. The narthex is a room we pass through on Sundays into the sanctuary, and pass through from the time of worship together back into the world. It's a place of transition, but sometimes it seems that the best part of Sunday is what happens out there as we reunite with one another and then bless one another. "The Lord it is who brings us together and sends us apart to be God's people."

In the gospel, ten people who've been sent out alone have found one another in their own sort of narthex, to assemble into some kind of community. Who knows what sort of community it would have been, but it was at least the sort of community that would cry out with one voice, instead of the proscribed, "unclean, unclean," they cry: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us," which accordingly, makes it church. So this neglected space between Samaritans and Galileans turns out to be invitational holy space. The space between sickness and health, ritual uncleanliness and cleanliness is transformed by Jesus from a place of limitation to a space of liminality; from a place of no, to a space for faith; from a place of abandonment to a space of welcome and restoration; from death to life. He

transforms it from a place of despair to the geography of hope, possibility, and worship. The space between rich and poor is this space, if we'll go there. So is the space between enemies, and between believers and doubters. Christ is in those places.

By His going right into this sort of space and His healing of these sorts of people—namely us, Jesus enters liminal space and, let us say, becomes liminal space. Christ is the invitational threshold between heaven and earth, between “what was” and “what will be” in our lives, and between what is passing away and what is eternal. The way we usually say this is that He is both God and man, fully divine and fully human. The way we experience Him is as a welcoming, beckoning, healing, cleansing, forgiving, saving teacher who ushers us into the mysterious, holy, eternal, transcendent realm of the divine. He is Savior and Lord. We come to Him with the leper's prayer on our lips, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on me.”

This suggests then that everything and everywhere is threshold to God. The region between Samaria and Galilee was. So was a manger in Bethlehem. So was a mountain where Jesus was transfigured. So was a wedding in Cana, a well where a woman met Jesus, a hillside where He preached. Even a tortuous cross was merely a threshold. So was a tomb.

All of life is this space then between earth and heaven. We are always in that transition place between “what was” and “what will be,” and sometimes the greatest gift we can give to ourselves and to one another is to be as fully present as we are able in the now, in the moment, in today. Covenant Day isn't really about the past, though when we think about the past, we feel thankful. It's not really about the future, though when we think about the future, I hope we all feel hopeful. It's really about the eternal now of God's saving and healing presence with each of us and with all of us together. It's about being fully present here, with one another, and with God.

God is not just back there 2000 years ago to be remembered; or back there just in the place in your life when you first became a Christian.

God is not just out there in heaven, or in that which awaits us in the next life. God is here. God is always here. I Am is God's name.

I think that's what Jesus celebrated about the one cleansed Samaritan leper who came back to give thanks and worship. He was so thoroughly caught up in the wonder of the moment of now that he quite neglected the ritual procedures of presenting himself to the Priest. He even quite forgot Jesus' own instructions to him to go show yourself to the Priest. Maybe there would be time for all that later. Maybe it just didn't matter anymore. Whatever the case, surely God was delighted with the prayer of a hurting, broken person who had received saving grace and mercy, and who was now so overcome with joy he could do nothing else but fall on his face at the feet of Jesus and worship.

That moment right there is DaySpring.