

Find Me In the Field:

a poem by Rev. Michele Ward

Here, in the borderlands
they come to me
They reach out and say Lord
have mercy
All ten of them, in the light of day
not hiding in a cave or shelter
All ten of them

Here in the in-between
they come to me
They reach out and ask
Lord, have mercy
All ten of them in the light of day
on my way into town

I send them off, saying
get yourselves to the priest
and he'll take care of it
My power goes out of me
healing them as they walk away
One of them turns back
realizing what's happened

Find me in the field
And I will have mercy on you
Find me in the field
And I will heal you of your disease
Find me in the field
And I will make you whole

You found me in the field
And I had mercy on you
You found me in the field
And I healed you of your disease
You found me in the field
And I made you whole

Turn back
I will make you whole
I will make you complete
in a way that the priests and religion cannot
I will give you my heart

Gratitude does not make you whole
believing does
Gratitude is a consequence of an open heart
heart made whole

This may seem like a slam dunk of a moral teaching about Jesus and what gets us the heal that we want. This may appear to be one of those moments where I tell us all that this passage is about being thankful for what Jesus does for us instead of saying, 'peace out' when we have what we need. Some of us may have been taught that this passage is about gratitude. That we are meant to be like the leper that returns to thank Jesus for healing him, not like the 9 lepers that go to the priests obediently without giving Jesus a second glance.

Now, don't get me wrong, gratitude matters. Like any good Presbyterian, I will tell you that our lives are meant to be living testaments of gratitude to God. But I don't think Jesus is just talking about gratitude here. Jesus distinctly says that it's about the faith of the man with leprosy--it's his belief that makes him whole.

This passage is about Jesus in the borderlands--Jesus in what may be a field, like in this depiction of the lepers on the bulletin covers this morning. Jesus is there, in the in-between, in the mess of it all. This is where we find the Messiah. A border is an edge or boundary, a place of not quite one and not quite the other. We are full of borders this week. The borders that exist between our nation and the ones that surround it, particularly the US-Mexico border. The borders that exist between our neighborhoods, our blocks, our families. I'm talking about the borders around our cities, our streets, our hearts. When will the borders, the alienation, the distancing between us, stop?

Now, boundaries can be good. They can help us make sense of the world around us. Mental health professionals talk about the value of setting emotional boundaries, of learning how to tell the difference between our emotions and the emotions of someone else. They can also be helpful to determining who is responsible for what. And then there are the borders that change based on who has the power to determine where the lines get drawn and who gets to draw them in the first place.

A queer, feminist activist named Gloria Anzaldua calls this in-between land the borderlands--*la frontera*-- it is a word that she uses to describe growing up in Texas near the border of Mexico. It is also the name of her provocative critical theory book: *Borderlands/La Frontera*.¹ I was required to read this book years ago in college, but it has stuck with me and shaped the way I understand identity, race, and belonging. She describes being a person from both places as someone that fits in no world and in parts of others. She identifies herself in this way, too.

Today, we find Jesus and his disciples in the borderlands--a place between places, a no name village on the way to somewhere else. Jesus is a borderlands person; he is human and divine, man and God, the son of Mary and the son of God. He knows what it's like to traverse two worlds, to be at home in both and in neither at the same time. It is here, that Jesus meets lepers who live in-between worlds, too.

As Jesus enters a village with his disciples, ten people with leprosy approach him. They call out to him, asking him for mercy. Their families abandoned them out of fear of the disease.

¹ Anzaldua, Gloria, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

They only have one another for support. It was common for people with the diagnosis of leprosy to form their own communities, sometimes outside of the city limits, either due to community mandate or to necessity.

The people Jesus met with leprosy would have been such people. Men, women, and children, sent away from their families and forced into isolation and continued worsening of their illness. People forced to live in subhuman conditions. In a leper community, the social boundaries between races do not matter as much. Living in the borderlands is one of the only places left for them. This group was made up of Jews and Samaritans; it makes me wonder how influential the suffering they encountered through their illness and the rejection they endured brought them together as human beings across divisions.

Leprosy is rare in the United States today with less than 100 cases reported each year. More commonly referred to as Hansen’s disease, leprosy is an infectious skin disease that causes sores and damages nerves in the arms and legs. Severe cases lead to permanent damage to hands, feet, blindness, and kidney failure. A common myth is that leprosy is highly contagious. People contract it through mouth and nose droplets and it is an airborne disease through close contact. Due to the fears of its contagious nature and the stigma of the disease, people with leprosy are quarantined and sent away from their communities.²

Leper colonies are not only a biblical reality. Almost 50 years ago, a leper colony in the United States, existed on a portion of the island of Molokai in the state of Hawaii.³ It was still an active quarantine site for people with leprosy until 1969. Over 8,000 people were sent there to live out their days away from their family and friends over the course of its existence. 16 people with leprosy still live on the island. Fear of the disease and the people that contract it are not that far away in our nation’s memory.⁴

People with Hansen’s disease still exist in various parts of the world, but leprosy isn’t the only way to become a social outcast or be misunderstood. They are whomever do not fit the social norms--the ones that dominant white culture say are social norms--they are the ones that do not belong to one place or to one another, but belong to both. They are the day laborers from

² <https://www.cdc.gov/leprosy/index.html>

³ www.nps.gov/kala

⁴ [Molokai Leper Colony](#)

California where I grew up, that most of America rely upon to harvest the almonds, walnuts, and grapes that we love to eat. White ranchers do not want to claim them when it's inconvenient for them. But when harvest season is coming, they wait with anticipation for trucks to arrive full of people with skilled hands and knowledgeable minds. Nov. 20th was the Trans Day of Remembrance. I cannot help but think of the 268 transgender people murdered all over the world in the past year. Hatred, racism, and fear motivate these crimes. The unthinkable violence that our transgender siblings experience perpetuates extreme otherness and misunderstanding. They belong in multiple worlds rather than in a binary world of male and female, and that is beautiful and good.

The good news in this text is that Jesus responds to the lepers in the land between Samaria and Galilee. He heals them. The ten lepers do not explicitly ask for healing; they ask for mercy. Jesus makes no promise to heal them. This could have meant a few different things to them. Perhaps they wanted mercy in the form of money or food. After he sees them, he then tells them to go and visit and then he tells them to go show themselves to the priest.

The priests were the only ones that could give them the official ruling of ritual cleanliness. This ruling would allow the people with leprosy, fully cured, to return to their livelihoods, their families, and their neighborhoods. They could finally worship in the temple again and go back to life as it was before they contracted leprosy. Jesus sends them to the priests for this stamp of approval. Noticing they are healed, they continue on their way. But one of them turns back. One of them realizes what has happened to him, and returns to the feet of Jesus.

The Greek words for healing for the group is different than the word used to describe the leper that returned to thank Jesus for healing him. Jesus healed all of them bodily, the text says, as they were walking away. Jesus offers them all the same miracle of physical healing. What was different was the wholeness of the healing that the Samaritan man experienced. Jesus tells him that his faith has made him well. The Greek word used here is the word for wholeness. His faith has made him whole would be a closer translation.

Jesus heals in the contemporary borderlands--in our borderlands. “Ni de aquí, ni de allá” - neither from here nor there. Jesus is neither from here nor there. Jesus is from everywhere. Because of this, Jesus can meet everyone where they are in their journeys. On Gloria Anzaldúa's

Borderlands concept in re: personal identity: “this inability to fully belong is not a state of despair and abjection – far from it. Rather, it is a productive state that signals agency and adaptability even as it honors the pain that comes with embodying contradiction.”⁵ This week I saw this kind of witness in the borderlands in our country and in our city. This is the kind that honors pain and offers restoration at the same time:

- The pastor that brings out pots of bread and coffee in Tijuana, leading mass for people with no place to sleep besides a soccer stadium.⁶
- The photojournalist that traveled with the caravan, documenting men, women, and children as real people, not as tokens, objects.
- The communities that feed, clothe, and shelter migrants as they travel thousands of miles to the US-Mexico border.⁷
- The civic leaders and community members that went out last week to the 1100 block of McKean where Amy Hayes, age 5, was shot. Amy Hayes is the younger sister of Taylor Hayes, age 7, the girl that was killed last summer while sitting in the back of a car.⁸
- The volunteers and firefighters cleaning up debris and searching for people after the fires in California⁹

Jesus is not the kind of healer that requires us to come and pay homage. Jesus heals all ten of the people with leprosy. But it is the one that turns back--the one that Jesus makes whole--that is the good news to carry with us. We are not meant to remain well in body and unwell in spirit. God shows up in the faces around us in the room, but it is not the religious or the established that are made whole in this account. It is the Samaritan, the one that saw the value in returning to the prophet that healed him--he is the one that is made whole. Jesus appears to all of us, wherever our borderlands are--whether we struggle with where we belong, what our roles are, what your identities are. Jesus meets you there, in your own borderlands. You are not alone there--you are found, and made whole.

⁵ <https://english.ucdavis.edu/news-events/news/must-reads-borderlandsla-frontera-gloria-anzald%C3%BAa>

⁶ <https://www.kpbs.org/news/2018/nov/23/mothers-migrant-caravan-fear-unruly-men-will-ruin/>

⁷ <http://time.com/longform/migrant-caravan-mexico/>

⁸ <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/crime/bs-md-ci-amy-hayes-shooting-20181120-story.html>

⁹ <https://krctv.com/news/camp-fire/camp-fire-latest-saturday-november-24-acreage-and-containment-remain-the-same>