

“Show Us Your Mercy”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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I have permission to tell our church that Mexon, a child of our church, is in the hospital. When I visited him yesterday, he was in good spirits, and on the path to improvement. The family thanks the church for our prayers for him.

Whenever I visit someone in the hospital, I not only pray for our church member who I am visiting. I also pray for all the patients in the hospital, as well as those hospital staff who tend to their care and healing. My friend who is a devout Jew, and also is a doctor, says that he believes that spiritual care, when it is offered or practiced, adds up to at least 10% of patient healing. He says when he comes into a room and someone is praying— whether Muslim, Jew, Christian, or whatever faith— he does not interrupt them. “You do what you can with your god, and I will do what I can with my medicine,” he tells them.

I asked Mexon yesterday if he had anything he wanted the children of the church to know about his stay in the hospital. He looked around at his bed and his room and his body thoughtfully, and then replied, “I would like to tell them that being in the hospital is like a cross between a hotel and an airplane. The only difference is that I have these,” and he gestured to the IV’s and monitors connecting him to machines. He also showed me his remote control, where he could call a nurse— AKA flight attendant— to bring him ice for his rash or anything else he needs for his comfort, and he also used the remote to flip through an impressive array of movies, or move his bed up and down.

You know those billboards on Route 4, the ones that advertise their hospital rankings in cancer research, or in heart patient outcomes? Forget all that; they should hire Mexon as their marketing strategist. If someone told me that a stay in their hospital was a mixture between a hotel and an airplane ride, I’d sign up for all kinds of treatments!

An airplane can get you from one point to another. A hospital can do that too— from illness or injury to health and healing. A patient’s time in a hospital is traveling along that borderland, between sickness and health.

So, with hospital visits and healing fresh on my mind, I turned back to these scriptures I had been carrying with me all week as I have chewed on what meaning they bring to my sermon; these are words that speak not only about healing, but also about miracles.

Let me give you my disclaimer about gospel miracle healing stories. They should have a warning label on them. They are kind of a set-up for disappointment. Many people read these, and they think that if they have faith enough, or pray hard enough, or are good enough, they will get miraculous healings, just like the lepers, or the blind man, or the hemorrhaging woman. And I suppose that **can** happen— we have all heard stories of faith healings. But those cases are more the exception, than the rule. We have known plenty of people who were certainly good, certainly faithful, certainly prayerful and certainly deserving, who did not get the healing outcomes for which they prayed. When the desired healing does not come, we can be led to believe that either our faith is not enough, or God is simply checked out and doesn't care. I don't believe either is true. We also know and care for people who live with disabilities; their bodies are loved by God and are channels for the Holy Spirit, just as they are. The vulnerability of the crucified Christ shows us that in sickness, and in health, our bodies are *especially* partnered to God.

But here, we do not simply have an acceptance of a vulnerable body; instead, we have a healing story of vulnerable bodies. In fact, these bodies were so vulnerable, they were like the walking dead. That's right, they were like zombies. My nephew in Atlanta used to have a babysitter whose day-job was to play one of the herds of zombies that were needed in tapings of the zombie cult show, *The Walking Dead*. People with leprosy of that time were like the walking dead. They would sometimes lose fingers or toes, or even limbs. People feared that their essence of death might rub off on them. And so, people with leprosy had to warn others coming near, "Leper! Leper!" so that passers-by would not get tainted by their state of being almost-dead.

Jesus's encounter with the lepers happens while Jesus is on a journey, going from here to there; Luke 9 tells us that Jesus had been preaching in Bethsaida, which is up by the Sea of Galilee, but then he set his face toward Jerusalem. What we know about Jerusalem from the later chapters of Luke is that this city, which holds the Temple as the cradle of faith, will also be the place where Jesus experiences betrayal, arrest, violence, and death.

On this journey from here to there, Jesus is walking along the border between Galilee and Samaria. This alone sets up a division, because the readers know that Galilee is a fertile fishing region populated by Jews, and is also where Jesus linked up with his homies, the disciples— whereas Samaria was the home of the Samaritans, people

layered with hostilities from and against the people of Judea, hostilities that simmered through the generations, stemming from disagreement as to where God should be worshiped: in the Jerusalem Temple, as Jews had done for centuries— or on Mt. Gerizim, where the Samaritans worshiped.

Jesus was walking through the borderlands of both people, both geographies, when he encountered the lepers. It's interesting for us, speaking of diseases, how much COVID has defined what and where our borders are: Who and what is clean and unclean, vaccinated or not vaccinated, red state/blue state. The Jews and the Samaritans had their battles as to which holy buildings were worthy to worship God. Today we battle over which monuments are worthy to tell our history, whose history gets to be told, and who gets to do the telling of it.

I am convinced that our health and healing as a nation will depend on what can happen at the borders where we meet one another.

As for Jesus, when he encountered the group of 10 lepers at the border, he could see they had no home. They were somewhere between here and there: when he was “going through the region between Galilee and Samaria.” The lepers approached him, and though they knew, as people considered contaminated, to keep their distance, they called out to Jesus, Doctor! Show us your mercy! (The NRSV quotes them as calling Jesus “Master” but in the original Greek, the word they used was “Doctor.”)

Here is how Jesus spent his mercy: he called them to turn away and show themselves to the priests. *Though they were not healed yet*, they turned to do as Jesus said-- a bold move, considering that in their current state, they would never be allowed to be near a priest. And yet they did. On their way, they were healed, their bodies restored to a state that could allow for health and connection, belonging, and a home. And they kept going, heading to the priests who could sign certificates stating that they were in fact “cleaned.” It was like their green card- until they had those certificates, they could not participate fully in community life.

So, I actually don't blame them for not turning back to thank Jesus.

But one, a Samaritan, did turn back, and not only thanked Jesus with words, but with his whole, restored body, which fell before Jesus in an overwhelming display of gratitude. He was not only thankful; he behaved as someone in love. He had found that his home was not centered on what the officials-- the priests-- said about him. After all, he was a leper once, but he was still a Samaritan, a religious outsider. He knew he could better stake his belonging, his sense of home, on the love and mercy of Jesus Christ.

Jesus' mercy was not just about moving people from near-death to life, although it does foreshadow his own story of resurrection.

Jesus' mercy was also about moving people from isolation to inclusion.

Now, I want to ask each of you to consider this question: What borders are you traveling along today?

Are you in any way like the lepers, traveling the borders between isolation and inclusion?

Or is your borderland between doubt, and faith?

Suspicion, and trust?

Anger, and forgiveness?

Shame, and respect?

Resentment, and release?

How can Christ's mercy— whether it is something you receive, or something you can offer— change where you end up?

What would Christ's mercy even look like in your life, if you were to find it and share it with someone else or for yourself?

Christ's mercy— it is something you can allow yourself to receive. And it is something you can allow yourself to share. I wonder if you try to practice that intention of mercy this week, will you find it any easier to cross these boundaries we sometimes struggle with:

Isolation to community

From doubt to faith,

From suspicion to trust

From anger to forgiveness,

From shame and respect

From resentment to release?

Show us your mercy, Jesus. We will follow where it leads us, and we will even try to remember to turn around and thank you.