

This is a Thanksgiving story. And a story of giving thanks. Two stories. Different times. Different places. 10 lepers on the margins. 10 people at a table. Equal part welcome; equal part boundary setting; a pinch of gratefulness thrown in. In any family—yours and mine—this, a recipe for hope and relationship, **or** for chaos and disaster. She would lean towards hope, I do, don't you? She would say love always gathered around her Thanksgiving table; but love is messy—in families most of all. So, with the rich smell of roasting turkey wafting in air; with heightened hope for some kind of “normal” Thanksgiving; that this year her table would be full; that everyone will find elbow room and warm welcome; with hope that twinges in her stomach and thumps her heart—with the thumping knock on the door—they come.

The brothers who haven't been able to get along since the younger one crossed that first boundary into enemy territory just by being born. The awkward man-hug; Boundaries and hope wound up into one—for one normal day. That they won't talk faith, or politics, or about mandatory mask bylaws and especially not the taboo subject—farming. Because they used to—*used to* run the family farm together—but we don't talk about *that* anymore. Sibling rivalry, dissention. 2 brothers, one God; a faith they were raised on, vast differences in how it is lived, *if* they live it; *if* they believe at all any more. 2 brothers, like 2 lepers—one the “chosen” nation; the chosen son; one not so much. Would they set it all aside for the sake of gratefulness and hope?

And the black sheep has come too—every family has one—mine does, yours does. The lepers have one too. A Samaritan. The one always on the margins; always

stepping outside cultural expectations; outside social decorum; outside religious norms. And the boundaries and hope wound up into one—that somewhere along the way there won't be that snide comment; the off-hand remark or backhanded whisper. That this year the black sheep would not be seen as one. That this year she would truly feel and be welcome at the table. Well, we know it in ourselves, don't we? That sometimes it is hardest to accept those who are closest to us—closest at the table, closest in belief, and too much like the ourselves we tuck away, than we care to admit.

The potatoes are bubbling, the gravy is whisking, the whining buzz of the electric knife slices air and turkey. A roar from the other room as a touchdown is scored. The table leaf is in. Make-shift chairs and garage step-stools; 10 place settings are in place. At last everything is ready—primed for hope that would gather around a table; that would bring them together in faith and love. “Kids, wash your hands.” And there is jostling and shoving as they take their place. The 10 yr. old whines that she's too big to sit at the kid's table; that she doesn't belong with the babies; that her legs are too long. And insiders and outsiders, black sheep and lepers, rich and poor, the unclean and the pure try to figure out where they belong—where they should sit and who they don't want to sit next to. But to sit at the table at all; calls us to consider the parts of us that are hidden in the borderlands of ourselves; the things we may least want to be seen and noticed and elbowed and touched. And at last the 10<sup>th</sup> is in place.

All are gathered. 10 people at the table. The black sheep. 2 brothers and rivalry. All are gathered. 10 lepers—9 of them once insiders now on the margins right

alongside the black sheep—the one outcast twice from the world<sup>1</sup>—first presumed and placed outside of faith; second a leper, unclean, and damned for sure. 10 people, 10 lepers. A disease, a virus, a pandemic, a meal that puts us all at the same table. Boundaries and hope wound up into one.

Hope that the hurts of the past would be set aside for the sake of reconciliation and the deeper bonds of family and love. That the spirit of gratefulness would spill over into a space of joy, and all the seemingly petty things that have divided them would melt into a distant past just for the sake of gathering, of being together, of being family; especially this year in the midst of a pandemic that seems never to end. Well, that's the hope anyway. Or maybe the real hope is to be able to return. To the place from which they came, unscathed, unchanged, for the illusive normal, whatever that means—while the hurt and the isolation and the mess are gated off like a dog in the basement removed from sight. Like a leper on the margins outside of town.

But love is messy and thanksgiving tables are too. And even before all the plates are full a 3 yr. old who likely understands boundaries, but doesn't think they apply to her—a 3 yr. old is up and dancing around; and she steals the bun from her sister's plate and a tug-of-war ensues. The bun pulls apart and a toddler teeters and the kid's table totters and the milk glass spills. And suddenly the dog, spurred on by the commotion, leaps the boundary of the baby gate meant to keep him apart. Bounding up the stairs, he flies headlong into the table, upends it and gobbles up the remnants

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<sup>1</sup> Meda Stamper, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org) October 2013; the concept of “doubly marginalized”

from the living room floor; while a 14 yr. old grins, grabs his earbuds and in the true spirit of Thanksgiving says, “This year I am thankful the dog ate my brussel sprouts.” And everything lays broken on the ground.

And just when we think this story of Thanksgiving is over and all too normal; the story turns to one not of Thanksgiving, but of giving thanks. The focus turns once more to 10 lepers—9 once insiders now on the margins right alongside the black sheep—the one outcast twice—outside of faith; unclean, and damned for sure. And *they* see. They see Jesus. And *they* know and *they* understand what we have not yet seen or known or understood. That Jesus understands the boundaries we have set. That our trauma and pain we try so hard to hide deep within the borderlands of ourselves; that the fear of being seen and known and rejected as black sheep; that it is fear with which we reject others and push ourselves to the boundaried margins of life.

But Jesus is and has already crossed the boundaries. In the borderlands and on the margins is where Jesus hangs out; where Jesus bumps elbows with us at the table; where Jesus notices the brokenness that others have not noticed; that Jesus hears the cries of 10 outcast lepers; that Jesus hears the cries of brokenness 10 people at a table; that Jesus hears us in our sickness and pain and the pandemic that holds us captive in isolation. And Jesus leaps over the gates we have built; Jesus bounds up from the depths of our dark basements to overturn our tables; and nothing will go back to normal—it cannot. 10 lepers cry out. “Have mercy.” They don’t even ask for what they want. Do they know? But Jesus knows, sees, understands. And Jesus heals.

And 9 of them; 9 lepers run quickly to do what the law requires; so that they can go back to their lives before; so that they can go back to where they came from. But one. One stays. And some would say it is because he cannot go back. That even healed, he is yet on the outside, he is yet a Samaritan, a black sheep. Yet while 9 healed lepers are thankful; while 9 healed lepers and our world would say, “Thank goodness! Everything’s gone back to normal;” one healed leper remains. One turns, one rejects the norm, one crosses the boundary to bow in gratefulness—a gratefulness turning him to the larger vision of God’s kingdom; turning him to give thanks at Jesus’ feet.

It is not mere thanksgiving. It is not simply to say, “Thanks Jesus for eating my brussels.” Not simply, “Thanks for healing my leprosy, but now I’ll be on my way.” Because he has experienced, is experiencing—because he knows Christ’s healing that extends beyond body to heal a broken heart, a broken vision, a broken world. Beyond thank-you, this leper’s gratefulness arises from such a deep place of faith that even Jesus is surprised at the response, so much so, Jesus gives name to the man’s actions—a word used only twice in scripture. Eucharistic. Yes... *eucharist*, communal.

In a very time when a leper on the margins cannot sit at a physical table, Jesus reveals to him the welcome of God’s communal life of grace. In a very time when we are on the margins, when our own isolation prevents us from gathering in our building and at the physical table of communion; a leper’s gratefulness calls us to join at a table of thanksgiving rich in Christ’s eucharistic healing and grace. In Christ’s eucharist life

that upends our shallow definitions that seek healing and life only for ourselves; to healing that is life-giving for all the world. That this thanksgiving; this deep eucharistic gratefulness opens our hearts and lives to the work and vision and imagination of God among us. Gratefulness that bows our heart; that bends our knees in that deep leaning toward the hope and wonder and glory of God.

Healing, hope, wonder, glory. These are the gifts revealed, given to 10 lepers on the margins. To 10 people around a table of thanksgiving. To a world living in the borderlands. In the midst of the messiness—the frailty of love, the struggle of family; the pain of brokenness; the fear of welcome. To a people in isolation, surrounded by pandemic and death. In the midst of it all—glory, healing, life, hope. Jesus. Turning our hearts toward a future, to a place and space for all people at the feast and table of thanksgiving. Jesus. Turning our hope toward a future rising from the depths in the boundary-crossing, rising, healing life of God's love. Jesus. Leaning the depths of our soul and our longing toward the hope and promise of God. Jesus. Leading us away from the normality of our borderlands' existence. Jesus. Calling us out of petty division and bitter hatred. Bringing us into life together. Abundant life. Jesus spilling and filling love and grace. Jesus empowering us to step across boundaries; to share mercy with the outsider; to pay attention to what is worthy of praise; to move toward God's future with assurance.<sup>2</sup> This is our Thanksgiving story. And in gratefulness, in eucharistic hope, we bow our knees, and give thanks to God. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Audrey West workingpreacher.org October 2016