

The untouchables: Luke 17:11-19

by [Maggi Dawn](#) in the [October 2, 2007](#) issue

Some years ago I worked in central London with an organization that reached out to people living on the streets. For most, all we could offer was food, clean clothes and a listening ear, but every now and then we met someone who wanted to find a new life. We ran a halfway house with a simple rule of life where a few people at a time could relearn how to live indoors. Such a change is not easy; a few who came to live with us managed the long, difficult process of reintegration, but more than half gave up and returned to life on the streets.

Living closely with people whom many consider untouchable, I learned more than I gave. One thing I've never forgotten was the way that living on the margins led them to reinvent their social values. In a little community under a viaduct near the famous Portobello Road market, I met an aristocrat who had inherited a huge country estate and been educated at one of the finest universities in the land. The pressure led him to abandon his fortune; now he walked the streets with just a few possessions in a supermarket cart, his cut-glass accent the only hint of where he'd come from. His best friend, however, was a working-class man from the poorest area of Glasgow. He had dropped out of the education system in his early teens and come to London to seek his fortune. The likelihood of these men becoming close friends in normal society was slim, but in the community under the viaduct, the Scotsman and the English lord found that their differences were immaterial compared to their common purpose—surviving on the streets in a cold climate.

Luke tells us about another community on the margins. Before the advent of modern medicine there were leper colonies on the edges of towns, where the rest of society kept them for fear of contagion. But Luke tells of ten lepers who hoped against hope for healing from the dread disease that ate away at their bodies and consumed their souls. When they heard that Jesus the miracle worker was nearby, they came as close as they dared and called out. Jesus told them to go to the priests, and along the way they found themselves healed.

Often we focus on the one man who came back as an illustration of healing, faith, worship and salvation in the life of the individual. But there's an equally interesting

undercurrent. Why did Jesus send the lepers to the priests? Why not heal them on the spot? I think the answer has to do with prejudice, and the way we exclude people from society.

In first-century Israel, priests not only diagnosed leprosy, but also declared a leper ritually unclean. By sending the ten to the priests, Jesus raised the possibility that they would not only be healed but also declared pure, which was essential if they were to reintegrate into society. The twist in the tale is that this particular leper colony was near a village on the border between Galilee and Samaria, communities that were acrimoniously divided. Jews considered all Samaritans ritually unclean, and would travel miles out of their way to avoid having any contact with them.

Stigmatization is a great leveler: while they were ill the ten lepers had discovered that which side of the border you were from meant nothing if you had leprosy. Like my friends under the viaduct, whose differences of class and education were wiped away by the taboo of homelessness, these ten lepers had become untouchables and had forged their own community on the margins. But once they were healed, the old divisions kicked into play again. Ten were healed, but only nine would be accepted; the tenth would always be unclean because he was a Samaritan. He knew that barriers to joining society on the Galilean side of the border ran far deeper than leprosy. Perhaps that's why he didn't bother with the priests but turned back to find Jesus.

It was only to the Samaritan that Jesus said, "Your faith has made you well." Maybe Jesus was talking about a different kind of wellness. Maybe he meant that deep-seated human divisions are a much more serious malady than even leprosy—that our souls can be far sicker than our bodies and yet most of us do nothing to heal the breach. Maybe he wasn't commenting on the attitude of the nine who didn't return as much as on the system that would accept them and reject the Samaritan.

We'll never know exactly what Jesus meant. But the challenge to our concept of the gospel and faith and healing is that they are not merely gifts for the individual, but bring consequences and responsibilities. Jesus healed with compassion and generosity, but he also drew people's attention from their own problems to the bigger picture. We are healed not to stay the same, but to live differently, breaking down divisions in society that exclude people because of their nationality, gender, religion or education.

Where do we place borders that cannot be crossed? Whom do we think of as untouchable because they come from cultural and religious backgrounds that we fear or despise through ignorance or misinformation? "Where are the nine?" asked Jesus. The nine were right back where they came from, safely on the right side of the border, healed of their exterior problems but locked back into their prejudices. Only one, through faith, became well in the broader sense of the word, realized his freedom and walked away from prejudice. He knew that under a viaduct, an aristocrat can be best friends with a man from the tenements.