

October 13, Ordinary 28C (Luke 17:11-19)

Maybe the lepers know that Jesus likes being in the borderland.

by [Dennis Sanders](#) in the [September 25, 2019](#) issue

I think one of the most fascinating words in the English language is the word *liminal*. When you are in a liminal place, you are at a threshold. You're past the first step but not yet at the next one. You are in the middle of things.

In this week's Gospel text, Jesus is on his way to meet his fate on the cross in Jerusalem. Luke says he is "between Samaria and Galilee." There's a problem here, because there isn't anything between Samaria and Galilee. It's just a fancy way of saying that Jesus is at the border.

I grew up an hour from the US-Canadian border. Driving across a border is an interesting feeling. One moment you are here and the next there. You don't get the same feeling when you are flying. When you cross at a land crossing, it's like going through the looking glass into another reality—something that is familiar and yet very different.

Jesus meets people in this liminal space of the border. Ten men approach and ask him to have mercy on them. They are lepers seeking healing, at the border between clean and unclean. They don't want to be on the unclean side—they want, they need, to be healed. They are tired of being separated from family and friends. Then Jesus shows up at the border.

Jesus and the lepers are at this threshold where everything could change—where the lepers believe things will change. Maybe they know that Jesus is all about the liminal, that he likes being in the borderlands. Jesus seems to be all about crossing boundaries, both physical and theoretical. He is willing to cross another one to heal these ten men.

Jesus tells the lepers to go and see the priest, and then they are healed. The men are ecstatic. They are no longer in the liminal space; they are now in a new space.

This should end the story, but we get a little bit more information. One man, a Samaritan, comes running back to thank Jesus. This is odd to Jesus. There were ten men, so why did only one guy come back to say thanks?

We don't know why the other nine don't return to see Jesus. We do know that this one man realizes something has changed. As a Samaritan, he would have known a lot about borders. He knows what it means to be on the other side of a border, and now he knows that things have dramatically changed. He knows what it means to be on the outside, and now he is crossing into a new land where he is whole. So he gives thanks.

We live in a time when people want to put up walls on our various literal and figurative borders. These borders are supposed to determine who is on the right side and who isn't. We don't want to mix things up, and we'd rather not live in a liminal state. Americans here, immigrants there. Democrats here and Republicans there. We don't want to be on the threshold of anything. We want things and people in their proper places.

There is a map of Minneapolis that dates from the 1930s. The city is divided up by where certain kinds of people lived. One area is labeled "slum"; another says "middle class." There are other areas marked "foreign-born" and "negroes." This map, which was used by realty companies, is clear about which neighborhoods you might consider living in and which ones you might want to skip.

Being at the threshold or the frontier is something Jesus was familiar with. In this passage he is on his way to Jerusalem, where he will suffer and die. Each stop along the way is part of a process, a process that brings him closer and closer to a moment when everything will change. Jesus is living the liminal.

And Jesus has always been at the borders, at the threshold. It seems to be where Christ is found. What about us? Where are we? Are we willing to live at the border? Today there are people who are forced like the lepers to live in a separate land where they are alone. Is God calling us to cross a boundary, to be willing to live in the liminal in order to bring healing?