

## Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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There are some people who love their commute, but I'm not one of them. I'm the person who sees driving from one place to another as, generally, a waste of time and an inconvenience. If I'm honest, driving is probably the place where I commit most of my sins—not in a road rage kind of way, but more so as a passionate fan watching a football game on TV. I vocalize to myself that the car in front of me needs to go faster, or I start shaking my head at someone running a red light, or I think something too inappropriate to say in a sermon. So, when I was on the way to church this last week, I was so ready to park my car and move on with my day. I waited for someone to cross the street, then, I made the turn down Le Moyne Street, and that's when I was struck. Not by a car, or a bird, or a person, but rather by the view. It must have been my first glimpse of the changing colors of the trees. The deep reds, the bright oranges, and the pale yellows almost made me stop the car. For the first time in a while, it was that middle space between work and home that became holy.

That experience feels a little like today's gospel reading. There we heard that Jesus was in a liminal space—it wasn't Samaria, and it wasn't Galilee, but it was a place in between. In that place, Jesus was approached by lepers who embodied the in-between. Rev. Dr. Matthew Skinner reminds us that those with leprosy looked like corpses because of their skin condition. And, in the Jewish culture, nothing defiles like death. So, these "walking corpses" were cast out of the communities, excluded from society, and shunned for fear of making others unclean.<sup>1</sup> Then, Jesus did what Jesus does best—he healed them. But not with a dramatic pronouncement or with a special prayer; rather, he said to go show yourself to the priest—that is, go show yourself to the person who can declare you as clean or pure. And, *as they went*, that they were healed. It wasn't when they were with Jesus or when they were with the priests, but yet again, it was in the middle.

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Dr. Matt Skinner, Working Preacher Podcast for October 9, 2022

This gospel reading is a striking story, partly if not totally because it's at odds with the world in which we live. After all, our society hates anything it cannot label or categorize. We want everyone to be male or female, we want to label abled or disable, we gravitate towards the dualities of good and bad, right and wrong, light and dark, here and there. But the reality is that labeling can be quite dismissive and presumptive. Labeling can make it so easy to cast aside those who don't fit, to reject those who look like corpses but are living humans, to dismiss those who don't fit in our binaries, and to literally enslave or slaughter people who don't look like us. As a society, the grey space, the in between, is often unsettling and uncomfortable, so we act like Jesus's society did with those lepers.

Yet, God's way is an entirely different way. Repeatedly, Jesus steps into the space-between and reveals God's presence. Often, we find God in the place between here and there, between male and female, and between this country and that country. For those are the places where Jesus brought healing.

Then, there is one last character in the story that sticks out to me. It's the Samaritan. He was traveling to see the priests and he noticed something different. So, he stopped and gave thanks in the action of it all.

Far too often I am not like that Samaritan. I easily get caught up in going from here to there or I'm busy with this or that, and I don't always pause to notice *and* give thanks. That is why for me gathering here with you all each week is so important. After all, worship, at its essence, is giving thanks. Giving thanks for all we have received. Taking time to notice God in the middle of it all. Together our bodies, our

minds, and our spirit offer thanks while in the acts of serving, singing, saying, and silence. It's training us to notice God's presence in the action and offers us the opportunity to give thanks.

For much like that Samaritan, it's in the thanksgiving that we are "made well," or to translate that a bit differently, it is in giving thanks that we are made whole. You see, gratitude, changes us, literally. Psychologists tell us that gratitude improves our relationship, our physical health, our mental health, and our self-esteem. Our acts of thanksgiving make us more empathic, reduce aggression, and even helps us sleep better.<sup>2</sup> So, it's no wonder that another study found that gathering as a faith community to give thanks literally extends our lives<sup>3</sup> and another study shows that churches improve our communities socially, physically, and economically.<sup>4</sup> So, maybe Jesus was on to something when he named that in giving thanks the Samaritan was made whole. Maybe our simple act of showing up and giving thanks could bring about wholeness in this community, in our city, and even ripple out into the world.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/what-mentally-strong-people-dont-do/201504/7-scientificall-proven-benefits-gratitude>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/crmh/worship.php>

<sup>4</sup> <https://blog.acton.org/archives/88116-the-halo-effect-the-economic-value-of-the-local-church.html>

In just a moment, we will have our communal time of meditation. I invite you to take a deep breath and pause to think about or even jot down in your bulletin what you're giving thanks for this week. Recall God's love, justice, and peace in liminal spaces. Then, as we continue our worship, look around at one another. Together we gather to acknowledge and give thanks for all we've been given in water and word, in bread and wine, in conversation and service, in church and in daily life. For today's gospel reminds us that: in the middle, we are healed, and in gratitude, we are made whole. But most importantly, God is present with us, loving us, and liberating us whether we recognize it or not. This is God's gift to us, a gift of love and abundant life. Thanks be to God. Amen.