

# SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

October 14, 2007  
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Lepers were people who lived on the margins, forced to live outside the community, yet were dependent upon that same community for survival. They were dehumanized to the point of being sick way down into their very soul. And they incited fear in other because it was thought their disease was contagious. And what was everyday life like for these people? Not only did they have to beg, because they could not get close enough to anyone to maintain a job, the book of Leviticus states, "The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp".

The lepers we encounter in today's text were doing what they were supposed to be doing. They were on the edge of the village, hoping someone would help them survive by giving them some money or something to eat. Then they see Jesus also walking on the margin between one village and another. They sense there is something special about him. Perhaps they had heard about his ability to heal. They risk in faith and call out to Jesus, hoping he would heal them. Jesus does not avert his eyes from them like many do to the homeless on the streets, pretending they are not there. He sees them and lets them know that he indeed has seen the sickness of their skin. After seeing them, he tells them to go show themselves to the priests.

All of the lepers continued on their way, and nine of them kept going down the path. This is the point in the story where many have criticized the nine. But I do not think that is fair assessment of the story. The nine were doing exactly what they were told to do. They were probably good Jews who knew they needed to be examined by the priest before having contact with anyone, even the one who healed them. They were determined to follow the law so that they could be welcomed back into society. Who could blame them for doing what they could to be restored to the community, return to their families and not have to beg for survival, since some of them could have been important merchants.

While the nine continued on their way, doing what they were told, there was one who returned in spite of Jesus' instructions. He knew as we walked along that he would not be welcome in the temple because he was a Samaritan. So he decides to do something other than what he was told to do. First of all, he returned and thanked Jesus. I was surprised to find out that in Jesus' culture, thanking a superior would indicate that you no longer had need of them, and the relationship would end.<sup>1</sup> Jesus could not be of further help to him. The Samaritan was grateful to be healed, for he would no longer have to beg to survive. But he also knew that he could not be restored to the community in the same way the Jews could.

This is when he did the second surprising thing. He worshipped Jesus on the spot. He went along shouting praises to God in a loud voice because he had been made whole again, regaining his self-respect along with his health. He knew that he would not be welcome in the temple, so he praised God

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<sup>1</sup> Malina and Rohrbaugh, Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, cited in Dylan's lectionary blog, [www.sarahlaughed.net](http://www.sarahlaughed.net).

wherever he could, even if others would find his behavior strange. He wanted to tell others of the wonders of God and would not be silenced.

Now if we took time to consider ourselves, would we be like the loyal Jews or the Samaritan? Do we live our lives doing what we are told, or are we willing to risk reaching out to the outcast and the stranger? Are we willing to go beyond our comfort zone to an unfamiliar place?

Now, before you answer, consider that Jesus does not criticize the Jews for doing what they were told and failing to thank him. He asked, "was none of them found to return and give praise to God," They nine did not shout their praises to God as they went. But since they did not thank Jesus, they left open the possibility of continued relationship with Jesus. They probably praised God when they returned to the temple. Jesus praises the Samaritan, because he believed there was we are called beyond the law, beyond doing only what we are told. Jesus healed the Samaritan and continues to heal, cleanse and restore all of us into wholeness and into community. We are brought into the center, brought into relationship with the Divine. But remember, we are then pushed back out into the margins.

Edwina Gateley tells in a poem:<sup>2</sup>

God sends me to the prostitutes  
Because we, the Church,  
Are so hungry,  
So bewildered,  
So proud.  
We are in need,  
And only the "sinners",  
The prostitutes,  
And those who have no cause  
To be proud  
And self righteous  
Can help us find  
Our way again...

Each week we celebrate our own thanks to God at the Eucharist, which as you may know, means thanksgiving. But our celebration of the Eucharist must, to be truly Christ's meal, be celebrated in remembrance of the one who calls us out to the margins, to declare to the outcasts the Good News of God's welcome. Our Eucharist is not just a celebration of our status as insiders; it is strength for our journey to meet the outsiders. We are strengthened within these walls so we can go beyond them. Jesus is still at the margins, and we are sent out each week to join him there. When we meet Jesus at the margin, we will begin to see the homeless as humans, not as nuisances. We look beyond the law into new ways of being with the outcast and stranger, and news ways of welcoming them in so they can be nourished. Jesus is showing us in our text today, that he enjoys going beyond the ordinary, and blasts open our conceptions of who we are as church.

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<sup>2</sup> Gateley, Edwina, [I Hear a Seed Growing : God of the Forest, God of the Streets](#)

This is summed up a another poem by Edwina Gateley<sup>3</sup>:

God Ran Away  
when we imprisoned her  
and put her in a box  
named Church.  
God would have none  
of our labels and  
or limitations  
and she said,  
"I will escape and plant myself  
in a simpler, poorer soil  
where those who see, will see,  
and those who hear, will hear.

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I will become a God-believable,  
because I am free,  
and go where I will.  
My goodness will be found  
in my freedom I offer to all-  
regardless of color, sex, or status  
regardless of power or money.  
Ah, I am God  
because I am free  
and all those who would be free  
will find me-  
roaming, wandering, singing.  
Come, walk with me-  
come, dance with me!  
I created you to sing- to dance-  
To love...  
If you cannot sing,  
nor dance, nor love,  
because they put you  
also in a box,  
know that your God broke free  
and ran away.  
So, send your spirit  
then, to dance with Her.  
Dance, sing with the God  
whom they cannot tame or chain.

Dance within, though they chain  
your very guts  
to the great stone walls...  
Dance, beloved,  
Ah, Dance!

Jesus has invited us to a dance within these walls and outside of them. Will we accept the invitation?

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