

When Jesus tells the man that his faith has made him well, he says it in Greek, in which *made well* really means *saved*.

This is a startling thing to say to one Samaritan, and not only because a Samaritan by definition has no faith.

It's startling because it runs against two deeply believed assumptions about salvation:
one, that salvation is for a community, not for individuals; and
two, that the community salvation is for is God's chosen people Israel, and there is no salvation, just like there is no faith, outside of Israel.

Our assumptions about salvation have changed since then, of course.

Over time, the church has gotten so punch drunk on the promises of baptism that it has promoted the equally faulty assumption that salvation is one ticket to paradise available only in baptism, which is available only in the church.

I remember hearing a pastor say that when he doesn't want to admit at parties what he does for a living, he says, "I sell fire insurance"--a remark that's even more sad than it is witty.

In this month's edition of The Lutheran magazine, pastor Peter Marty confronts this problem thoughtfully, writing:

Jesus...consistently spoke in the language of promise, not threat--hope, not fear.

Lutheran Christians baptize to be a part of something, not to escape some calamity.

We baptize into the whole Christian church on earth.

God has a much more diverse family in mind for us than we could ever make for ourselves.

By widening our view of God's intentions, Pastor Marty is moving us in the right direction.

God's grace always overflows the little bowls in which we experience and then try to capture it, even little bowls as big as the baptismal font or the whole Christian church.

Luke's little story is bursting open with big implications.

Healing is given to all ten lepers, even the disobedient one who doesn't show himself to the priests, even the ungrateful nine who don't return praise.

Jesus himself praises the faith of a faithless Samaritan, and proclaims him saved, even though he is neither a Jew nor a baptized Christian, even though he remains technically unclean and therefore still rejected by God, even though he is all by his lonesome.

Jesus names him saved as he moves *through the region between Samaria and Galilee*, the borderland between hostile neighbors, the buffer zone between clean and unclean, the strip of land assumed to be the geographical line between the chosen and the condemned.

And Jesus is *on the way to Jerusalem*, Luke intentionally reminds us, the place where Jesus is going to die on the cross to reach even people beyond the reach of salvation and outside the love of God...which is to say people who aren't Jewish, like us.

Somewhere along the way, the church has lost its place in this story.

We have forgotten that we are the lost and condemned, the outsiders somehow included in the surprising width of God's welcome.

We have forgotten that like the ten in Luke's gospel, we were the unclean ones denied access to God and God's people, that once there was no place for us in the house of the Lord.

We have forgotten that we are lucky former lepers and assumed instead for ourselves the role of the priests, the sanctimonious and judgmental bouncers at God's exclusive nightclub. Too often we have come to worship not to give loud, unrestrained thanks to God but to show ourselves to the priests, to see and be seen.

We have identified ourselves as members rather than ministers, and built altar rails like barbed wire fences to remind the unbaptized not to trespass where God wants to welcome them, at the open feast named with the Greek word for *Thank You*.

We have fancied ourselves necessary and focused on our institutional survival as if God really needed us to keep the world in order and keep salvation available to the public.

Our own denomination as a whole is bleeding and dying in large part because too many of our congregations are curved in on themselves, which of course is Luther's definition of *sin*.

Stewardship seasons devolve into public broadcasting pledge drives about how much the church needs your money and, by extension, how much the wicked world needs the church.

The truth that we are so loathe to admit that we have all but forgotten it is that God really doesn't need us, that God's life and healing and grace and saving love abound beyond our silly strictures and standards, and that we do not exist for ourselves.

We exist only because of and for the guy in the gospel who walks the edge between Samaria and Galilee and brings together what we like to keep separated.

We exist only because of and for Jesus, who moves not only between Galilee and Samaria, not only between nations and ethnicities who despise, attack and avoid one another, but also between Jew and Gentile, between clean and unclean, between holy and unholy, between baptized and unbaptized, between church and world, even between life and death.

We the church exist only because of and for the man who walks the line between and re-draws the line, not as a border but as a bridge.

We exist not to judge whether lepers are clean or baby souls are insured but to praise God with a loud voice and give thanks for the healing and the grace that happen even before we notice it and also for those who don't come with us back to Jesus' feet.

We exist to give thanks, and then to give thankfully, not because the church needs the money or the world needs the church but because we all need a new vision of community that erases barriers of culture and race and theology and status as a hopeful sign that life is more than leper colonies and gated communities and that God is so much bigger and kinder than priestly pronouncements and dehumanizing religious rules.

We exist to fall at Jesus' feet and shriek wonderstruck gratitude for the width and depth of grace, in and beyond baptism, in and beyond obedience and gratitude and propriety, in and beyond the church and the world which are both suffocating from the chokeholds of inflexible structures built with concrete assumptions and reinforced by fear.

We exist to praise and serve the one who changes reality, not only with skin deep solutions of healed leprosy but also with restored dignity and community to those pushed to the margins by a fear-based system punch-drunk with power and curved in on itself.

And we exist to share this startling good news with others who may or may not be grateful or faithful but will be touched and changed and blessed and loved by God just the same.

Daniella Jade, child of God, today we *welcome you into the body of Christ and into the mission we share: join us in giving thanks and praise to God and bearing God's creative and redeeming word to all the world.*