

Sermon: Life in the TZ Zone: Liminality & the Leper's Healing (Luke 17: 11-19)
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I want to start in a sort of weird place today...but hey, it's The Twilight Zone, so we all about weird this month, right?

I want to begin with the story of a cat.

Schrodinger's Cat is a thought experiment/paradox dreamed up by Schrodinger, an Austrian physicist. And in a variation on the story he tells, imagine:

- A cat in a bunker that also holds a container of poison gas that could be released at any time, killing the cat. (Sorry cat lover's)
- Until we look inside, we don't know if the cat is dead or alive.
- Once we look in, it will be one or the other.
- But, according to quantum mechanics (and this is the weird part), until we look in, the cat is in what is called "super-imposition": it is both dead and alive
- Our act of looking in the box forces the choice.
- Our curiosity kills the cat.
- But until then: the cat is stuck in liminal space. Stuck in the in between. In fact, we've forced that cat into that liminal space by placing it in the bunker -- neither fully alive or dead
- Weird, huh?

We might say that this cat is stuck in LIMINAL SPACE.

- **This word "liminality" has been our focus for the last few Sundays.** At its simplest, it describes that experience of being "**in between.**" Liminal spaces and liminal experiences are often ambiguous, disorienting, when you are in the transition of what is and what will be.
- **Liminal experiences happen normally to all of us:** You might be in that time between childhood and adulthood or that liminal space when you move from one city to the next, with no real sense of home in either place. Often, our life choices lead us, for a time, in to those liminal periods.
- **But today, I want us to consider those persons who are stuck in liminal space,** unable to move beyond. And those stuck in liminal spaces and experiences that we do not choose. That in-betweeness that is imposed upon us.

In a sense: Our cat is stuck in a liminal space imposed upon it (unless we think it willingly climbed in that box with the poison gas!)

In many ways: Our story from the Twilight Zone today is the story of a person stuck in liminal space. Even more, it is about a person forced by others to exist in that liminal space. Neither here nor there.

- In this episode, entitled "Eye of the Beholder," Janet Tyler lives in a world where ugliness is not allowed. Born horribly disfigured, the government that controls her world has graciously provided a series of medical procedures to try to fix her face. She's had 11 operations altogether and this is the last she is allowed. If this one doesn't not work, she will be forced to be segregated in a colony of people who share her same affliction.
- When we meet Janet Tyler, her face is completely covered in bandages. We can only hear her voice, as she painfully awaits for the removal of the bandages --for the great reveal that will determine her future: life amongst normal people or internment in a sort of "leper colony."
- Janet Tyler is not only lost in "The Twilight Zone," but she is also trapped in a state of liminality. Under those bandages, she is much like Shrodinger's cat: She's both ugly and beautiful at the same time. Potential and reality, waiting to see which it will be when the bandages come off. She is stuck in this in-betweeness.
- Janet Tyler does not choose to be in the liminal pace of this hospital, waiting to learn what they will find when the bandages are removed. Because of the harsh rules of this culture, she is forcibly stranded in this liminal space between ugliness and beauty, between possible freedom or inevitable condemnation.

Like Janet Tyler, the men with leprosy who encounter Jesus in our text from Luke today are trapped in a world where they are forced into liminal space. They are forced to stand in the in-between.

We might argue that every person that encounters Jesus in the gospels is in some way or fashion living in liminal space -- at the very least the liminal space, the threshold between not knowing Jesus and the change that will or will not happen after they encounter Jesus.

But Luke's intends us to see that these men are really stuck in the in-betweeness: physically, geographically, and theologically!

They are stuck geographically: Luke tells us they are straddling the border between Galilee and Samaria. Between Jewish territory and gentile territory.

They are stuck physically: We know that, because of their physical disfigurement, they are trapped, stuck in the inbetweenness of rejection and acceptance. For the moment they are ostracized, cut off from community, forced to keep their distance from others, presumed unclean.

They are also trapped theologically. Why are they unclean? Because they have sinned against God. But, if by some chance they can truly repent, be declared clean again, they will move out of that inbetweenness and back into community.

But for one of these men, there is a further liminal space into which he has been forced to live. One of these men is a Samaritan, a hated enemy of the Jewish people, a person considered unclean by virtue of his ethnicity. He is forced into the inbetweenness of being both a social outcast as a leper and as a religious heretic for being a Samaritan!

He is steps into this liminal space, not because he chooses it, not because it is part of the natural ebb and flow of life, but because that liminality is imposed upon him by an unjust culture.

I want to invite us to ponder a bit today this idea of imposed liminality : those persons who, often due to the prejudices, bigotry, and ignorance of their cultures and communities, find themselves forced into, even trapped in liminal spaces, trapped in the inbetweenness.

On your tables you each have a card with a descriptor printed on it. I want to invite you to take a few minutes to talk with each other about what is written on your card and consider: How is that person experience liminality? And is that liminality of their own choosing or is it imposed upon them?

transgender teenager
closeted lesbian or gay person
immigrant or refugee
person of mixed ethnicity
recently divorced person
racial minority in mostly white town
homeless teenager
Individual with mental health challenge
Young African American male in the U.S.

How many of you could just as easily have put your name on one of those cards today?
How many of you find yourself in a time of life where you feel stuck in the liminal space, or even feel like you've been put there against your will, by the choices made by others?

- How many of us can relate to being stuck in between the boundary of who people want us to be and who we want to be?

- How many of us here have felt that experience of being stuck between that boundary of believing we are broken and messed up, and knowing we are worthy of love?
- How many of you can relate to the nightmare of Janet Tyler, forced to hide behind bandages, forced to try to be something she is not?
- How many of you can see yourself in the story of the man living with leprosy from our gospel text today?

To be certain, **there are many people in our culture who are forced into that liminal space**, forced like Schrodinger's cat, like Janet Tyler, like the leper, to hide themselves away because who they are or what they are make others uncomfortable?

- people of minority gender and sexual orientations that are "in the closet" are not there because they choose to be. They are forced into that usually unhealthy and often destructive liminal space by our unjust cultural norms.
- Those persons living with mental health challenges who choose to keep their situation to themselves for fear of the very real stigma that comes with being honest -- they too are forced by our unjust culture into unhealthy and often destructive liminal spaces.
- Many of us are forced into the closet when it comes to our expressing our political or social views because we fear what will happen if we speak out, especially in a culture that tells us that politics have no place at church.
- Those who represent racial minorities in our culture are forced into that ambiguous, liminal, in-between space, where they feel it's better to keep their heads down and avoid attention for fear of what might happen if they do not. Those that still live in the liminal space between the lynching tree and some future hoped-for racial justice (that seems so elusive every time we hear one more story of a black man shot dead).

All of this to say: This man in the story today: He's not some character out of the ancient past. He's part of the world we are living in every day, right now. He is the people we walk past every day. He is some of you sitting in this very room today.

Like the character in our Twilight Zone episode, he is forced into liminal space, forced to hide in the shadows, denied his full humanity.

And how does Jesus respond to all of this? What does Jesus do?

He meets him in his liminality...and helps him move beyond it.

He is not willing to let the man stay stuck in that liminal space. He offers him

connection, grace, a way out. Realize the man might be healed of his leprosy, but he's still stuck in the liminality of being a Samaritan. Still he celebrates. He gives thanks. Because Jesus, in offering him not just solidarity, but unconditional love and acceptance, has set him free to cross that threshold into whatever awaits him.

We are the church we are because many of us know what it's like to be forced into liminal spaces that make other people comfortable but which are unhealthy for us: spiritually, emotionally, even physically.

We are the church we are because many of us refused to stay stuck in those places, and for many of us it was the freedom we found in the grace of God and love of Christ

We must stand with those people who have been forced into liminality, those forced into that "no man's" land between "Samaria and Galilee" between "clean and unclean" between "rejection and acceptance" between "condemnation and Grace."

But we also have a call to help people move past that liminality, by helping them to find their true and full personhood within the grace and love of God.

BTW: Janet Tyler doesn't stay stuck in that liminal space. Eventually, she demands that they remove the bandages. And we discover the truth. She is actually beautiful by our standards. The doctors and the nurses: they are all horribly ugly. But in her culture, the medical procedures have been unsuccessful. She is taken to meet the man from the colony where she must go now life. He is, of course, handsome by our standards. And he shares with her that in time she will come to feel a sense of community with the others. She will come to feel loved. Reminding us, once again, of the power of love to help us move beyond those situations of forced liminality and towards the abundant life that God promises.

Amen.