

## **Shifting Out of Neutral**

The year was 1983. I had just graduated from Seminary and I was broke. My dear grandmother decided to gift me with a new car. I did my research and decided to buy the most economical, reliable and low maintenance car I could find: A silver blue Honda Civic. My only mistake: electing a “stick shift” over automatic transmission.

Living on Bainbridge Island at the time, it was inevitable that I would eventually need to conquer and successfully climb the steep hills of downtown Seattle. After disembarking from the ferry one afternoon, I decided to make the leap of faith. Courageously climbing up Marion Avenue, I reached 2<sup>nd</sup> avenue before needing to stop on a steep incline. Not wanting to burn out my clutch or roll back and hit the car behind me, I shifted into neutral and stepped on the foot brake. It was a precarious balance.

All was well until the light changed. I took my foot off the brake, started rolling back, the car behind me honked loudly, I panicked and floored it leaving what might have been one of the largest skid marks in Seattle history. It didn't occur to me that I could have used the emergency hand brake. I am happy to report that I survived the event without causing traumatic injury to myself or others. But it was a ride I most certainly will never forget and provides a wonderful metaphor for understanding the spiritual journey.

This morning I would like to talk about the dangers of living in neutral and not allowing God to help us to shift spiritual gears so that we might have the abundant life he has promised each and every one of us. In today's story from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus, on the way to Jerusalem, traveling on the border between Samaria and Galilee encounters ten lepers as he enters a village. This group of lepers, who would normally have very little to do with each other because of their ethnic and religious differences, find themselves drawn together by their common misery. Because of fear of the disease being spread, they were forced to live on the outskirts of the village, impoverished, malnourished, isolated from family and friends and seen as having been punished by God.

The stigma associated with leprosy or Hansen's disease persists to this day. Interestingly Harborview Medical Center in Seattle is one of fifteen federal clinics in America that continue to treat this disease—usually successfully I might add—and, according to a Seattle Times article, many of their patients continue to suffer from discrimination even in this modern age.

But despite all of the grief, the lepers are still able to recognize that Jesus is the one who can help them. Despite all of the rules designed to separate them from the community and make these condemned persons invisible, Jesus, the healer and compassionate One, sees them--really sees them and tells them to go see their priests. Priests in that day and age were powerful gatekeepers-- the ones responsible for determining if a person was ritually clean and thereby authorized to be part of the community. Man, am I happy this is not part of my job description!

This must have been a very large act of faith on the part of these vulnerable lepers who had spent years living in limbo--not being able to truly live and not having completely died. It is important to note that before they had been healed of their leprosy they are firmly told by Jesus to get moving and shift out of neutral. They are instructed to march directly into the hands of those who had the authority to harshly judge them and sentence them to more suffering if they showed up at the temple and were not truly or fully cured. Can you imagine their initial doubts and fears?

Jesus had asked them to step out in faith, out of living in neutral, so they would be once again free to make the choice to go forward and move forward with their lives so they could live into the abundantly fruitful lives that Jesus promises every human being. Don't you wonder how many steps those lepers had to take before they knew for certain if their prayers had been answered, before they knew what was going to happen to them?

And then the most wonderful thing happens. They, one by one, discover that they have in fact been healed. Although it is clear that all ten of the lepers have been cured on a physical level, the restoration of their social and spiritual health is what is emphasized in this particular gospel story.

By being made clean they would now be allowed to be readmitted to their villages, workplaces, homes, and family circles. They were freed of the evils of prejudice and discrimination. After having been cut off so completely from those they loved, their desire to return to a normal life must have been overwhelming.

They now had the power to go where they wanted to go and to make their own life choices. The story could have ended here and it would have been a very happy ending. The immediate problem was solved. The ten men are no longer in emotional or physical pain. Jesus had completed his job, right?

The clue that there is more to the story can be found in the response of the Samaritan leper, the one whose Jesus' audience would have thought was least deserving, he is the one who sees that not only has he been healed and freed from disease but also sees that his ultimate health and spiritual wellness is far more than being symptom free. To be able to stay well, to living fully into the abundant life Jesus has promised and not slide back down the hill, the Samaritan leper stops to examine what has truly happened.

This moment of deeper contemplation and interior listening is at the heart of any transforming moment in our lives. He is the one who doesn't forget to turn back to give Jesus thanks for saving him for a holy and life-giving purpose beyond his wildest dreams. He reminds all of us that we need to slow down and deeply reflect upon God's movement in our lives. He allows God to help him shift out of neutral into a higher gear.

This turning back and making time to revisit things is at the heart of what we recognize as *metanoia* in the Christian tradition: a transformative and live-giving change of heart that furthers and deepens the spiritual journey. Its meaning is much richer than the word repentance which often is a tragic mistranslation of the word *metanoia* and conjures us the image of an angry God who will harshly judge us.

In classical Greek mythology, Metanoia is often depicted as a cloaked and shadowy goddess, who sows seeds of healthy questioning and searching within our souls so that we might see more fully and be able to recognize more clearly the arrival of Kairos, the god of new opportunity and transformation. As Christians we celebrate these two divine energies of *metanoia* and *kairos* as they come together in our lives in the presence of Jesus who continually leads us to deeper self-awareness and prepares our individual and collective souls to live into his new creation that is constantly being formed and reformed in our world.

This gospel story is so full of gratitude and grace. It reminds me that we are the ones who are empowered through our faith in Christ to turn away from the temptation of status quo thinking and neutral living. Sadly, the nine lepers who were healed but did not turn back to give thanks remained at risk of slipping back out of gear into neutral living again.

No matter how difficult of a hill or mountain we find ourselves needing to climb God has the right spiritual gear to help move us out of neutral and move us forward in faith not only as individuals but as a nation. May we all shift into the power of God that accelerates our awareness, compassion, transformation, and the integration of our hearts, minds, bodies, and resources for the purposes of furthering God's kingdom here on earth.

It is in this place of deep gratitude that the healed leper within all of us is now invited to live and it is from this joyous place that we are now invited to give of our time, talent, and treasure for the betterment of all of God's people. Let's all follow the path of the grateful leper. Amen.