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Most of us know at least a little bit about keeping our distance from others. It can happen when you're feeling overwhelmed, with too much on your plate; or when, for whatever reason, you're feeling out of step with the people around you. Sometimes we become convinced that our lives are a mess, that other people are doing so much better than we are; but believe me, if you could be a fly on the wall in the office of any clergy person for a day or so, you would feel as normal as night and day. Messy, imperfect, and sometimes very embarrassing – that's normal for a human life, for every human life. But for a variety of reasons, we all know something about withdrawing, about isolating ourselves, and keeping our distance from others.

The ten lepers who encounter Jesus have a visible skin disease that requires them to keep their distance from others. We, on the other hand, often seem to have an invisible spiritual disease that keeps us at a distance from each other. We might be going through a problem with a relationship or struggling at work, or we might be depressed or grieving, we might feel as if others are judging or criticizing us... for any number of reasons, we often feel as if we don't fit in or don't know how to approach others; maybe we just don't want to be a burden – so we keep our distance. The lepers in this morning's story by law have to keep their distance physically. We often keep our distance from each other spiritually.

But when we keep our distance from each other like this, we often start to feel a distance from God, as well. Because, as the first epistle of John says so powerfully, we can't love God if we can't love each other.

And this is the cornerstone of Christianity. It's the most profound truth about God and the deepest need of all human beings. Simply put, Christianity is about love with skin on it. Christians believe that the Word of God written in the Bible is important, but it isn't enough. We believe that the Word of God spoken through prophets is important, but it isn't enough. In the end, the Word of God has to become flesh, it has to touch us. And once we've been touched, the love of God can then become flesh in us. Our role in life, our meaning and purpose in life, is to pass on to each other what we have received from God, through each other.

In his most recent book, Rob Bell tells about a bus driver in Manhattan who every night drives the same route and says the same thing when he gets to the end of the line and opens the door for his passengers to go home. "OK, here we are, folks, end of the line," he says. "It's time for you to go home. But before you get off the bus, I want you to leave all your problems with me. I know it's been a long day and everybody has their burdens. But you've just got to leave all of that stuff right here with me, and when I drive across the bridge to Long Island to park the bus, I'll take it all with me and leave it there. Because it's time for you to go home now, and you don't want to take any of that stuff with you when you walk into your apartment or house to be with the people you love the most. It'll just get in the way. So, let me take it for you. We'll see you tomorrow."

That bus driver knows that we are all carrying around more than we should. Our stress and anxiety are getting in the way of our relationships and preventing us from living the lives we

could be living. If we don't unload our burdens, we can't be present to people we love, we can't express gratitude, we can't be present to God. If we don't unload our burdens, we end up drinking too much, we watch too much television, we isolate ourselves, we blame and find fault with others, we keep our distance not only from each other but from our own souls.

So, the bus driver says to his passengers what Christ says to us, "Leave it all here with me. You go home, rest, and love the people in your life. Leave that other stuff with me." This is what we're here to do for each other – with Christ at work in us, we are meant to heal each other and set each other free. If you've failed or made a big mistake, you've come to the right place. If you're carrying heavy burdens, this is where you belong. Leave it all here.

The other day, a local charity said that they were noticing many churches are dwindling in size and experiencing compassion fatigue, and as a result, they couldn't find a church to house homeless people over the holidays. So I contacted them on your behalf, and I said, "Our doors are open. We are not fatigued and dwindling; in so many ways, we are energized and growing. Because we sense that we are being healed, and our way of saying thank you is to do what we can to pass that healing on to others."

In other words, I think so many of you have heard Christ say, "Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens," and now in response you are returning to give thanks like the one healed leper, and you're saying, "Our doors are open. Come to us."