

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer

February 15, 2009
2 Kings 5: 1-14; Mark 1: 40-45

I've been thinking about this service for a while now --- and have been both looking forward to it and worrying about it. The Bible stories we heard read this morning come with a lot of baggage, so speak. To hear these stories with 21st century ears and to understand these stories with 21st century minds is fairly challenging, I think. And to hear them read during a morning worship service, and to have only 15 or so minutes after that to hear someone speak about them is, well, a daunting expectation. To do any talking about healing when we know we have had loved ones die of unhealed diseases, and when we know persons, even sitting among us this morning, who are living with unhealed illnesses and conditions is not something to take lightly. It requires some careful thought on both the speaker and the listener, and cannot be regarded simply as a problem to be solved. So today will be more about questions than answers, and more about having us think in broader terms than trying to be too specific or too exact in our approach.

With that in mind, what I want is to look at each healing story from a faith perspective, not a medical or scientific perspective, and explore what each story might have to say to us about being persons, and a community, of faith.

First the story of Naaman in 2 Kings. A general in an enemy army listens to an Israeli slave girl's advice about the prophet in her homeland, seeks to buy his healing through his gifts to the king of Israel, is thwarted, goes to the prophet Elisha, is outraged that he is not seen in person but only given a verbal prescription, is insulted by that prescription, is again advised by a servant to pay attention, does so, follows the instructions, and is healed. An amazing story --- with many layers of development and meaning. For our purposes today, however, we'll limit ourselves to just a few of these layers. And one is that healing is a process, we might say, and not just a quick fix. Naaman thought he could get what we want just because he wanted it. He thought if he paid for it, he'd get it. He thought if he deserved to be treated a certain way because of his reputation. He thought things would happen according to his demands and expectations. But they didn't, and because they didn't he almost missed out on what God was doing.

Another preacher describes Naaman's healing like this: "A proud man muddles toward health, toward a restorative knowledge of God and himself. But he makes progress only by ragged fits and starts. He has a clear self-interest – a cure for the disease that threatens his career, his place in human company, his very life. ; The people who care about him appeal successfully to that self-interest, but the pull of other passions almost derails him. Naaman craves respect almost more than he wants health. He is so sure he knows what he needs, he almost refuses what God wants to give. Almost. But not quite. When he doesn't get the attention he thinks is his due, God waits, letting him vent and strut. No lightning bolt consumes him mid-rant, no disapproving angel

descends. God waits until Naaman acquits himself of the odd human propensity to work against one's own good. And when, after stalking off, he relents, we see in him what God had seen all along – a man of faith” (J. Mary Luti, “Muddling Through (II Kings”, The Christian Century, September 23-30, 1998, p. 859. www.religion-online.org).

Who can't relate to this in some way? For aren't we too often our own worst enemies, caught up in self-interest, and often pushing away or pushing against the very things and the very ones who want what is best for us? The ragged way is our way, too, and muddling through is how most of us go. And for most of us healing comes in fits and starts. And by healing here I don't mean the healing of a headache through Tylenol, or the healing of an infection through antibiotics. Naaman had a physical skin condition that needed healing, yes, but Naaman also had a spiritual condition that needed healing just as much. And so the ragged way of healing I'm talking about is more multi-dimensional. It's the kind of healing that takes place over weeks and months and years rather than hours and days. The healing of an addiction; the healing of grief over death and loss; the healing of guilt and shame; the healing that leads to the acceptance of one's terminal illness and approaching death; the healing of a broken-heart or a broken relationship; the healing of bitterness; the healing of past wrongs and injustices --- and so on. None of these kinds of healing happen instantaneously --- or on a straight path upward and onward. All of them involve times of acceptance and times of resistance. All of them happen more slowly than we want them to happen. All of them test our willingness to let go, so to speak, and let God. Which is what Naaman eventually did, and which led, eventually, to his healing. Maybe for someone else, dipping 1 time in the river Jordan would have been sufficient. Maybe for someone else Elisha would have made a house call. Maybe for someone else the king would have known what to do. Who's to say? What we can say, I think, is that every healing happens in its own way, and that there's no magic formula that works the same for everyone. Because it's not a magic formula at all --- it's God --- it's God's love and God's grace and God's presence and God's power that are at work , and nothing about God can be patented and manufactured and distributed as a sure cure for every human ailment.

The preacher I quoted earlier concludes her reflection with this insight: “We know Naaman. We know all the irritating and endearing, weak and tenacious behaviors in this story ---- altruistic aims, big ideas, bad tempers, smelling a rat, taking offense, throwing tantrums, pleading and cajoling, seeing reason, changing your mind, eating crow. We've all asked for brazen blessings on unavoidable compromises. So to watch God leave Naaman alone while never leaving his side is a huge relief. It is also a strong antidote to perfectionism, a reproach to a thousand daily judgmental impulses, a cause for gratitude and praise. God outwaits us while in weakness healing begins. God outwaits while we locate the fissures of mercy in the heaped debris of fear and anger....and learn to breathe the Spirit's air. We change and grow, believe and love by grace, the best we can. We are going to the river, whatever the reason or unreason that moves us; we are going to wade right in. Knee-deep in unaccountable love, we'll meet the One who gives us all our ragged victories and presides over our life” (ibid).

God outwaits us. God never leaves our side. Naaman discovered that his healing wasn't about him, but about God. And that's what we discover too. We aren't what everything is all about. God is.

A man with leprosy is healed in reading from Mark's Gospel, too. In this story, the leper comes to Jesus and requests healing. And in this story Jesus touches the man, and the man is healed. Again, a multi-layered story --- but also again, we'll lift up just one or so for our consideration. And the one we're lifting up today is the dynamic of touching and being touched.

Jesus touched one who was considered untouchable. Because, as the New Revised Standard Version translates it, Jesus was moved with pity. The word in Greek is really stronger than that and has to do a kind of compassion that propels one into action--- that gut level feeling that overtakes us, I suppose, and compels us to do something, without counting the cost, or considering all the ramifications. Jesus knew and understood the demands of the Torah --- he knew that touching the untouchable was a serious offense, and not something one would usually think of doing. But he was moved to do it---as if he couldn't keep himself from doing it. That's the kind of compassion Jesus had for the man ---- not just a compassion of feeling, but a compassion of action. A compassion that compelled him to do what was considered by all to be undoable. He touched a man with leprosy. And the man, who also knew the risks of coming forward to Jesus, and who was keenly aware of his audacity to request healing, was touched and healed. Both actors in the story take risks. To touch the untouchable is to risk both known and unknown consequences. To be touched is to risk vulnerability, and even possible rejection. But it is through this risk taking, this touching and being touched, that the miracle occurs --- the man is healed.

In his book, Moral Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery, Dr. Richard Selzer reflects on the miracle of touch:

“I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face post-operative, her mouth twisted ---palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed....to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had cut the little nerve. The young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private....'Will my mouth always be like this?' she asks. 'Yes', I say, 'it will. It is because the nerve was cut'. She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. 'I like it', he says. 'It is kind of cute'. He bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I am so close that I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate her, to show her that their kiss still works.....I hold my breath and let the wonder in” (quoted by P.C. Enniss in Feasting on the Word, p. 336).

Connected with this theme of touching and being touched is the understanding that healing is related to wholeness. For the man is not simply healed of a disease. He is restored to community. And he is brought to joy. And even though Jesus tells him not to, the man can't help but share the good news of what Jesus had done for him. “He

went out”, Mark writes, “and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter”. The man’s joy was, we might say, as or even more infectious as was his former leprosy. He couldn’t contain it, and when he shared it, others caught it and passed it on to even others, and so the good news spread from place to place.

Wholeness involves more than physical healing. It has to do with being re-connected with God; it has to do with transformation and renewal and having one’s life feel meaningful and full again. And people who aren’t cured of a physical ailment can still be healed --- because they can still know wholeness, they can still be in vital relationship with God, they can still be filled with joy. That woman Dr. Selzer described will never have the same face she once had. To others she will always look disfigured. But she is loved ---- and being loved will see her through. And her life will be full.

That’s the healing we are all offered by God. Whether we are physically cured or not, we can all be healed. Because in Christ we can all be made whole . Because God’s love always waits for us --- and never leaves us ---and always knows our need – and is never ever afraid or embarrassed or reluctant to bend down and touch us ---to kiss our crooked smiles, to caress our infected skin, to taste our salty tears, to hold our grieving hearts, to massage our aching spirits --- and make us whole. That’s who God is. And that’s what love does. Amen.