

COVENANT WORD

"I Will."

II Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Mark 1:40-45

A message by
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Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting to read and study these thoughts more carefully. Please know that I do not take full credit for anything that may be contained within, because I may have read or heard something at some point during my pilgrimage and do not remember its source and thus, cannot give the rightful author his/her credit. I pray that you will find inspiration and encouragement.
Sarah Shelton



WHERE FAITH COMES TO LIFE

My sweetest childhood friend called me on Christmas Eve. When I picked up, I anticipated warm wishes for a Merry Christmas, but what I heard was tragic news. Her son, a twenty-something, had accidentally overdosed. He thought he had heroin when in reality he had been dealt fentanyl. His death was immediate. Some days after the funeral, my friend and I met for lunch during which the whole story spilled out. She described the ins and outs of rehab; the difficulties of firm boundaries; and the ongoing task of picking up any redemptive pieces left in her life. As we sorted through guilt and glimpses of hope, it slowly dawned on me that we weren't just talking about addiction, we were talking about leprosy.

Now in my entire fifteen years of ministry here, not once have I been to the hospital to visit anyone with a confirmed diagnosis of leprosy. Not once has there been a funeral for anyone who has died of leprosy by the strictest definition. But, my friends, let me warn you that leprosy is rampant. It strikes all ages, and its contagious nature cannot be contained. Leprosy, a Biblical metaphor for all kinds of disease and malfunction, has the power to undo the world.

You have encountered leprosy if you have ever been diagnosed with a social disease with stigma attached.

You have struggled with leprosy if addiction has ever held sway over you or someone you loved.

You have met leprosy when your marriage is at the brink or you have purposefully cut off relations with a

child or parent.

If there are bad decisions you wish you could undo or you worry that it will be found out that you are not all you profess to be, you suffer from leprosy.

If you wonder about the hate and brutal violence associated with race and poverty, you have wrestled with leprosy.

If you have reached the conclusion that there is a deep disorder marking this world with which we collude or which we resist, you know leprosy. (Brueggemann)

Leprosy, a Biblical metaphor for all kinds of disease and malfunction, has the power to undo the world.

From our Biblical stories for today we will see how no system is exempt. Leprosy prowls the halls of Washington D.C., to the humble homes of unnamed people everywhere. Leprosy invaded a prestigious general as well as an unnamed man, because disease overrides all barriers and leaves all at risk. (Walter Brueggemann, "The Song of an Ex-leper," p. 332 ff of *The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann*) But then, so does the love of God. Do not lose sight of that as we continue.

Not included in the lectionary readings, the book of Leviticus spends two whole chapters instructing priests how to diagnose diseases of the skin. They teach about pronouncing lepers ritually unclean and how to perform rites of purification on the off chance that they are healed. As for the lepers themselves, Lev. 13:45-46 reads: he... "shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his lip and cry, 'Unclean! Unclean!' He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease." Now in

case you didn't catch it the first time around, the scripture repeats. "He is unclean. He shall dwell alone in a habitation outside of the camp."

Lepers, therefore, were removed from family and friends without hope of reunion. They could

not gather with their religious community, which evidently also meant that they were barred from God as unworthy. They were unclean outsiders who could not be mistaken as having anything in common with the healthy insiders. And so the lepers were obedient about dressing as they were told, speaking as they were told, and they did not dare cross over the line that had been drawn to separate them from those with unblemished skin, because they were dependent on those insiders for their livelihood.

(Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Tenth Leper," *The Preaching Life*) In case you do not understand what I am getting at, you might could think about it this way: "They live over there in north Birmingham; and we live here and over the mountain. We are not like them. God knows we feel sorry for them, but we need to be sensible about these things."

In both stories for today, however, each leper, desperate to be healed, steps over the established and entrenched boundaries. And thanks be to God, what they discover there is that the healing love of God cannot be contained by human standards.

Naaman's story is found in the book of II Kings of the Old Testament. It is a story known by Jesus. He references it in his sermon at Nazareth (Luke 4). Naaman not only is given an identifying name (speaking to his importance), but his position in the Syrian army as a great warrior is described. His traveling to Israel,

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enemy territory, would not have been such a threat if he was a private, first class, but Naaman is a five-star general. It would be like if George Patton had traveled unannounced to Germany or Colin Powell to Iraq. So no wonder the King of Israel anxiously rips

his garments when Naaman arrives. The king knows he cannot cure Naaman and is afraid that his inability will cause an international incident. This is when the

What they discover there is that the healing love of God cannot be contained by human standards. prophet Elisha steps in. He knows what to do to cure leprosy. He sends word for Naaman to come to him.

If you remember the story, Elisha was actually the original destination. A slave girl to Naaman's wife – an Israelite captured as booty in a Syrian conquest – knew that Elisha was a prophet of God. She tells someone who tells someone who tells someone until Naaman gets the word. Imagine what that felt like to this pretentious man! It would be a little like an undocumented worker, while putting a roof on your house, tells you there's a healer in Juarez, Mexico. The medication found there for cancer or HIV/AIDS or cystic fibrosis or depression may not be ADA approved, but it will surely cure you.

Because Naaman is desperate, he goes to Israel to find this guru-type healer. He takes wagons full of gold and silver and fine clothes with which to barter. That's how generals operate, isn't it? ...sealing the deal...signing a treaty...surely payment for peace is akin to payment for healing when you are moving across war zones.

Naaman arrives at Elisha's door expecting Camp David security and ceremonious pomp and circumstance. But what he gets is a simple messenger with a simple message: "Go and dip yourself seven times in the River Jordan." It infuriates Naaman. He feels disrespected, which gives me pause. Who does he think he is after all? He might have a chest full of medals, but remember, he is still just a leper; still just a sinner in need of grace; still just a brother needing a brother to give him a hand. This sort of leveling is new to Naaman, but it speaks to the boundary breaking love that Jesus calls us to in the gospels.

It is his servants who calm him down. This traveling community who knows Naaman inside and out encourages Naaman to go to the river Jordan (which, by the way, is rarely deeper than your knees. He would have had to work hard to get himself all the way under 7 times!) He is healed and returns home restored to social community, yes, but he is also forever changed because of his awareness of the community that so faithfully walked the way with him to keep him moving closer and closer to the healing embrace

of God. Naaman takes two wagons of dirt back to his home in Syria as a reminder that the only God is the God of Israel. Now he must figure out how to be faithful to a new God in his old office...a God who cannot be bought but a God who grants healing as a gift. (William Dols, "The High Price of Being Healed," *Just Because It Didn't Happen...*)

In Mark's gospel, we find that Jesus and his disciples are on the move in the area of Galilee. He is preaching and casting out demons. And then, a leper actually approaches Jesus. He kneels before Jesus and with all humility acknowledges that he believes Jesus has the power to make him clean, if only Jesus will.

Most translations say that in response Jesus is "moved with pity." "Pity," however is too weak a translation. What Jesus experiences is more than just feeling sorrow over the leper's circumstances. Brian Blount says that his pity is an intense visceral response that causes Jesus' compassion to result in restorative, healing action. You see, Jesus, by touching this man in need of healing, is acting subversively. In this act of healing, Jesus is condemning the social and religious practices that contribute to the misery of those in the greatest need. So in a perilous act of solidarity, Jesus reaches out and touches the leper. He reaches across the boundary of disease and isolation and judgment and touches an untouchable, violating Jewish law and in the process, making himself an untouchable, ritually unclean. (*Preaching Mark in Two Voices* – this reference is found in Gary Charles' article in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1, p. 359)

The price for this great reversal is high: Jesus is now treated like a leper. Note in verse 45, because the leper tells everyone what has happened, i.e., that Jesus healed him by touching him, that Jesus cannot enter into a town openly. Here we are, right in the very first chapter of Mark at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, and Jesus is already ostracized, put on the periphery, an outcast seen as questionable because he brings wholeness, and restores community to those who have been banished. Surely Jesus could have healed the leper by just saying a word, but instead, he touches him showing complete identification with those who suffer.

Jesus' priority is that the man is restored to community. This only happens through showing himself, completely healed, to the priest who probably cast him out to begin with. The Wild Goose Resource Group of the Iona Community gives a powerful conclusion to the Biblical story. It reads from the leper's perspective like this: (Calum MacLeod, Fourth Presbyterian Church, "We Bring Our Broken Selves," 2-12-12)

You should have seen the priest's face when I arrived at the door. I suppose me grinning all over didn't exactly help. He knew my family, especially my father, who had helped to build the parish hall. My dad and the priest were very close, but they never talked about me. You see, when you get leprosy you don't belong anymore. You don't belong to your family [and] you don't belong in the church. This was the priest who had confirmed the diagnosis, the priest who had sent me from the sanctuary never to return, asking God to have mercy on my soul, the kind of thing you'd say to a criminal en route to the

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gallows. But here I was back seven years later...and presenting myself as cured. He didn't know what to say, he didn't know which book to look for or which page to turn to. He had only ever been taught the ceremonial word with which to send lepers away. He had never learned how to receive them back. It took a long while

for him to come within three feet of me. He couldn't bring himself to touch me. He asked me to put a sack over my head, and he took a pin and began to stick it into different parts of my body, asking, "Where am I touching?" And every time I knew, because every time it hurt. Pain had returned because I was healthy. Then he took the bag off my head and asked, "How is this possible?" I said, "It's possible because in a world where everybody, including my religious friends, has avoided me, somebody, one man, touched me. No, he didn't just touch me; he embraced me as if I were the lost brother he'd always wanted to find." The priest didn't ask for [the healer's] name. It was as if he already knew. As if he were disappointed that what religion turned away from, God embraced.

This embrace by God for wholeness is what we observe in the characters of Elisha and Jesus. They remind us of God's good intention to overcome

the leprosy that occupies this world. Naaman and the nameless one are concrete reference points in our communal faith memory that reminds us of the guarantee that God's healing is actively working its wonder. Not all lepers have been healed yet, nor have all the worldly maladies been healed, but the believers in Jesus Christ know that healing is offered when we go seeking its source. Knowing the powerful healing of God, we dance and sing with the psalmist that while *weeping may linger in the night, joy will come in the morning. Our mourning will be turned into dancing and God will replace our hospital gown with party attire. For God is gracious, reviving our lives so that we will praise God.*

The simple words, "I will," often point us to the dynamic of God's healing power that community provides. Just yesterday, Larry FitzGerald and Mark David Jackson took sacred vows of faithfulness and commitment in this sanctuary. They did so by saying, "I will."

Just this morning, we dedicated ourselves to baby Cort Adams by taking sacred vows of faithfulness and commitment by saying, "I will."

When the leper asks Jesus to heal him, Jesus, by taking on the very life of isolation that the leper experienced, healed him by making a sacred commitment of faithfulness by saying, "I will."

To what healing will you submit by repeating those simple words, "I will?"

To what healing will you commit yourself by shouldering the responsibility of faithfulness and saying, "I will?"

What do we, empowered by the love of God, will this day?

Perhaps your answers lead you to public decisions of praise for the ways God has restored you or because you desire to join this community of faith to walk with you along the restorative road of healing. Whatever your decision, if you desire to make it public, meet me here at the front as we stand to sing the hymn of commitment provided on your insert.