

Sermon, Proper 9C, July 3, 2022, Jane A. Beebe

‘But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash, and be clean’?"’ (2 Kings 5:13)

In many of the healing stories we hear about Jesus, the recipient of God’s healing power is often a person who is particularly vulnerable. Often Jesus’ healing touch does not merely restore health but also restores the person to their community, to full dignity. The transformation often seems to go beyond what the person was probably able to imagine for their life. Sometimes they even become disciples. However, today’s story from 2 Kings involves a man with stature. Naaman is described as being a mighty warrior in the army of the King of Aram. He is responsible for the victories of the Arameans against Israel. (And we are told that God has had a hand in this for his own purposes).

Still this man’s might and reputation are not enough to keep him from suffering from a skin disease. (The term “leprosy” was used for a variety of skin maladies). God enters into the picture in the form of a young girl captured from Israel who is a servant to Naaman’s wife. She exclaims to her mistress, “If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his skin disease.” (2 Kings:3:4) This prophet is Elisha.

In preceding passages of 2 Kings we learn that Elisha has earned his reputation. There is a wonderful story of how he saves a woman from her creditors,

and her children from being sold as slaves. Similarly to Jesus Elisha asks the woman, “What shall I do for you?” Then he asks her what she has in the house. All she has in one jar of oil. Elisha tells her to collect several vessels from her neighbors. Then she is to begin pouring out the oil she has into the borrowed jars. With her children’s help she fills all the jars. Elisha tells her to sell the jars of oil to pay off her creditors. She will even have enough money left to live on!

Then there is the famous story of the Shunammite woman. She and her husband have often offered hospitality to Elisha. When he learns that the couple have no son he tells the woman she will conceive even though she and her husband are older. Going back to Abraham and Sarah we hear several stories in the Bible couples who have children in their old age. It is a sign of God’s care and providence even in impossible situations. Later the Shunammite woman’s child becomes ill and dies. In her grief the Shunammite woman goes to find Elisha who is able to raise the child from the dead.

Once Naaman hears that there is someone who might be able to heal him he does not take steps to approach Elisha directly. He goes to his king. The king of Aram then sends a letter to the king of Israel. Naaman then travels to Israel taking with him an enormous amount of money in gold and silver, as well as rich clothing. However, the king of Israel is suspicious, suspecting a ploy of some kind. He knows he is not capable of healing anyone and tears his clothes in his agitation.

Elisha hears that the king has torn his clothes. He tells the king, perhaps somewhat wryly, “Why on earth did you do that? Simply send Naaman to me. Let him learn that there is a prophet in Israel. ” (2 Kings 5:8)

Naaman arrives at Elisha’ house bringing with him his entire retinue of horses and chariots. I had never noticed this detail before. Naaman comes to Elisha with all that symbolizes his status in the world. Yet none of those things protected him from leprosy, or brought him healing. Yet it is understandable that, perhaps fearful that this too is a dead end, he needs to surround himself with what gives him dignity. Elisha cuts through all that by giving him simple directions: “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean.” (2 Kings 5: 10)

Naaman begins to splutter. “That’s it? That’s all I have to do? I thought this prophet would do something. Couldn’t I have done this in the rivers of Damascus? Surely they’re better than the Jordan?” Somehow his servants convince him to try what Elisha has commanded him. “You were ready to do something difficult, weren’t you? Why not try this simple thing?” (2 Kings 5:13) Naaman washes in the Jordan seven times. He is not only entirely healed but his skin is described as being like that of a young boy.

It is surely human nature to want the complicated plan, that miracle that will, once and for all fix all that is wrong. Elisha subverts that tendency in Naaman.

Naaman's servants recognize that there might be even more power in performing a simple act: "Wash, and be clean." The first act of healing in this story is Naaman's discovering the power of humility. He has asked for help: a basic prayer. It is difficult to ask for help. We have to acknowledge what it is we lack. Naaman steps alone into the water as his vulnerable self. His retinue will only get in the way.

And he does this seven times. You have heard before that the number seven has meaning in Scripture. It is the number of completion. I imagine that each time Naaman steps into the water he summons just a bit more trust. Entering the water just once would not build his expectation that healing will come, that God is in this process. I think of our regular celebration of the Holy Eucharist—and all that is sacramental in our worship together. As with our regular consumption of food, it is not something we participate in just once. It is a daily need. We return again and again as Eucharistic Prayer C says: not only for solace, but for strength; not only for pardon, but for renewal.

I know you have heard me speak of my habit of walking many times. Yet I come back to that first walk I took with intent, that simple suggestion in a magazine to "go out the door, walk twenty minutes, turn around, and come back." Sometimes I fall away from the routine. I can get bored with my usual routes. It can be hard when it's hot, when it's cold, when it's buggy. Yet there is always

something to see. I breathe more deeply. My thoughts flow more easily. I have known the joy of feeling good for no reason. That in itself is a huge gift.

What we don't hear in his morning's passage is what I think is the real culmination of this story that occurs in the next few verses. The healing is wonderful and important certainly. Yet there is more. Once Naaman has been healed in the Jordan he returns to Elisha and says, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel..." (2 Kings 5:15) In gratitude Naaman offers Elisha a gift that Elisha refuses. Naaman then declares that from now on he will worship only the God of Israel. It is amazing the lengths God will go to, to heal us, to get our attention. Take that first step. Follow that simple suggestion. God will do the rest.