

Epiphany 6 B
2 Kings 5:1-14
Mark 1:40-45
February 15, 2009

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill
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Notes not for publication

I love today's story from 2 Kings about Naaman. I would say it's one of my favorites, but people who've been in Bible study with me know that I say that pretty much every week. But I really do like this story, because it's so us. It's so human, encompassing both our desires and our flaws, as well as proclaiming the will of God to give us abundant life. As I worked toward today, two questions came up that I'd like us to look at: one is, what do we mean when we talk about healing, and the other is, how does it happen? Both of the scriptures for today address these questions, but I want to start first with Naaman.

Naaman is a big, important guy in the land of Aram, a commander in the army, but he's got a problem. He has leprosy; probably this was a kind of skin condition, and not the kind that makes body parts fall off. This powerful man is pretty motivated to find a solution to his illness. He probably doesn't much like hauling around this kind of weakness, when his job is to be tough and intimidating. So when he hears one of his wife's slaves, a Hebrew girl, talking about a prophet in Israel who can heal his illness, he's on it. He calls the 800 number from the infomercial and wants the cure right away.

His boss, the king, writes a letter of recommendation to get him in and sends him off with all kinds of riches and surely an enormous entourage to carry it all. They go to the king of Israel, and Naaman shows his letter and demands his treatment. The

king is of course not the one Naaman is looking for, and he flips out, suspecting that this great man of battle has come to pick a fight with him. Finally they get that all sorted out, and Naaman pulls up in front of the prophet Elisha's house with all his horses and chariots, ready for the big event. In response, Elisha sends a messenger out into his own front yard—can you imagine? Like who would that have been? A barefoot little kid, maybe, or a servant? And his message to Naaman is to go wash in the Jordan seven times, to restore his flesh and become clean.

Now it's Naaman's turn to flip. What? This guy can't even come out and speak to me? Doesn't he know who I am? Doesn't he know I brought my chariots? Naaman was expecting somebody to do something. Like his healing somehow really matters to the balance of the universe, and somebody needs to get to it. Hear again what Naaman says: "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not... the rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage (5:11-12). The commander did not like being commanded to go dunk in some foreign river, which is hardly a river at all in some spots. He was ready to go back home just on principle.

The most profound words in this story, in my opinion, come at this point from the mouth of Naaman's servants, from the lowest, least powerful, least significant characters—these and the serving girl from the beginning aren't even named in the story. Yet they speak with wisdom, saying, "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'?" To his credit, Naaman recognizes wisdom when he hears it; he goes to wash as the prophet of God commanded, and "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean" (5:14).

I said I had two questions to bring to today's stories, and the first regards the nature of healing—what does it mean to be healed? For Naaman, being healed meant having his skin clear up. It was pretty simple for him, and it often is for us too. Healing means for us reversing the illness, healing the bone, eradicating the cancer, removing whatever the barrier is to physically unencumbered life. And surely those who live under the strain of physical illness know what a blessing the unencumbered life is. We have a lot of body issues in our society, but whatever your body looks like, I'm telling you that if you got here under your own steam today, or even if somebody had to help you or wheel you in here, no matter what, there are a whole lot of other people whose bodies just couldn't make it today. Physical health is to be cherished; many people seek physical healing.

But that's not all there is. Even though the Greeks taught us a long time ago that our bodies, minds and spirits function in separate spheres, the fact is that more and more scientific research is showing us that we really can't separate these when we talk about health; they're interrelated and interdependent. Stress and worry suck up energy and lower the body's immune system, and things we think or feel inside but refuse to express can surface instead as physical symptoms or illness. Wounds of the heart do not go away by themselves; if they're not given air and light, they just wait, twenty years or forty or more, and sometimes they fester and get worse. Grief, hurt,

betrayal, fear, anger—all are natural, but all will cause damage inside and sometimes outside if they're not allowed to process and work their way out. So healing can be about coming to terms with an issue of the heart, sometimes going back in time to do so.

These definitions of healing are pretty straightforward, and they're not even really religious. But one more dimension of healing is perhaps the deepest, and that is to be set right with God and with others. You can also call this reconciliation, but it's still about mending something that's broken, or making life possible where there once was only death. Confession and forgiveness are a form of healing, whether in worship or face-to-face with another. To be healed can mean being restored to community, as happened with the leper in Mark, whom Jesus told to show himself to the priests to be declared clean; the point of that was for him to be accepted into society again instead of being ostracized for his disease.

We see this more spiritual kind of healing happening with Naaman too. For his brokenness was not just about having bad skin; he also had a skewed understanding of himself and his own importance in the world. Perhaps even more important than the healing of his leprosy was the healing of his spirit, at least in that moment, the act of humility he was basically forced into by having to wash in the Jordan. He submitted himself to a wisdom higher than his own, even as it was spoken by his slaves. That willingness to submit to the truth, to be humbled by offering up his weakness, is yet one more form of healing.

So then, how does this healing happen? There may be as many ways as there

are people. But generally the healing process begins with asking. You can ask for yourself, or you can ask for somebody else, but it pretty much ends up recognizing that there's a problem and seeking a solution, claiming the possibility that God might do a new thing with us. We have to take the first step on the road to receptivity. We have to state, loud enough for God and ourselves to hear, that we want to be healed, that we desire to receive whatever the gift God seeks to give us.

In addition to asking, some other sort of action is normally involved. We often think healing has to be hard or complicated, a big production—lights and smoke, a clap of thunder. Like Naaman, we might think somebody's going to have to stand in the middle of the street—or maybe in the middle of a church service—and wave their hands and say some special magic words. And sometimes it might happen in dramatic fashion like that. But sometimes healing occurs in a more subtle way, without our really realizing it, because we've taken some small action to help make it possible. It might be to show up for some time in prayer every day, to sit quietly and be aware of the love of God. It might be to pray for and think well of someone we're in conflict with, or to write in a journal about something we fear or can't quite figure out. Like an apple ripening on the windowsill, healing really can come with time, assuming the apple will agree to sit still where the sun can reach it and not roll off onto the floor.

Finally again is the God piece; I think how healing happens is through encounter with the living God, whom we know in Jesus Christ. The gospel lesson contains a profound theological statement coming from the lips of the leper: "If you choose, you can make me clean." Do you hear the claim, the conviction in that? "I do choose,"

Jesus says. "Be made clean!" To trust the strength and power of that kind of love—to ask for it, to do something to put ourselves next to it, and then to trust it—this is at least one way to talk about being healed, and it certainly is a powerful one for me.

Yesterday morning I was privileged to take communion to a woman who is a member of a UMC in another town—she's here in Wimberley now, battling cancer under hospice care at her sister's house. They'd asked for a preacher to bring the sacrament, and as is always the case with such visits, I came away as the one blessed. We talked about lots of things—her cat, who patrols her room and takes very good care of her, and her grandchildren, who live too far away, in California. We talked of the projects she's trying to get done, family visits and a quilt she's sent off for binding. We celebrated communion, she, her sister and I. We remembered that the bread and cup are for us a gift of the broken body and life of Christ, even as we too are the Body of Christ, even as we too are broken. (That broken body stuff takes on new meaning in a hospice bed.)

After we celebrated the meal, the sister left us so we could pray together. I held her hand as she began to speak, thinking that she was going to tell me what she wanted me to pray for. Lots of people do that when the preacher comes. But she looked at me and talked and talked, listing different kinds of concerns and thoughts, and it turned out that she was the one who was praying. Her prayers ran the gamut, from praise to confession to petition, and when she finished, she turned it all over to God and said, Amen.

We talked some more; I remarked on her deep faith and her willingness to

receive from God whatever it is God would give. She said that through it all, her illness and other unrelated troubles, she had learned to trust God—then we were quiet for several moments, and finally she said, “All I can do is smile when I think of that trust.” I said there are a lot of supposedly well, whole people running around who don’t have that kind of trust or peace, and she said, “Yeah, I used to think I wanted to trade with them, but not any more. What could you trade for that peace?”

In a very real sense, this person who has struggled with so much illness and hardship has even so, even in her bed, already received God’s healing. And her peace is healing for people who encounter her; it certainly was for me. Many others, even many of you, have stories to tell as well. Many will have brought wounds and brokenness in here today that seem irresolvable, impossible to heal. But God is seeking each of us, and God already knows what we bring. Christ has walked the road before us, and will walk it with us again right now. And that’s the healing part, the part where we let go and give in, not to let illness overtake us, but to give ourselves to trust in the love and life of God. We have an opportunity to do that today, for ourselves and for each other. As we enter into this time, whatever your level of comfort or discomfort, just do what you feel led to do, and don’t worry about doing anything right or wrong. Just know that today, God chooses life for us, and we can choose to receive it.

Children: “Love Heals”