

Epiphany VI (B)
II Kings 5.1-14; *I Corinthians* 9.24-27; *Mark* 1.40-45
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
15 February 2009

~Paul H. Friesen~

There are two ways to be healed; the way of Namaan the leper and great hero of Aram (Syria), and the way of the unknown leper of Israel, common and undistinguished. For eighteen hundred years these two stories have been read together for the good of those who call upon God.¹

True, if we think we need no healing, it doesn't really matter that there are two ways. But if we admit to weakness of any kind, and accept our need to seek God's help, it does matter.

And when we really think about it, we know it matters. That is why, after all, we confess new sins each week and hear again the words of God's forgiveness. Sin recognized but un-confessed is un-forgiven. And unless forgiveness is received, we grow both harder and weaker, by the week.

But we do know it does matter to admit to our weakness, whether we invite weakness by our own sin; or feel it through the sins of others against us; or if like all who live we simply feel the wounds of being human, sometimes more and sometimes less.

That is why, after all, we sometimes feel dissatisfaction with our actions and words and implications, and those of others. It is why we find our own silence unbearable sometimes and at other can't bear to hear the words of others.

It is why we feel dissatisfaction with our self-absorption in one moment, and the attempts of others to govern our lives in the next; with our own fears of mortality when the funeral bell tolls again; with the depression of those we love when their lives slip out of their control.

Such things—wherever blame might first fall—if unspoken keep their power over us and haunt us unless we speak, and seek, and are healed.

We all need healing; so we each need to come first to the beginning of our own story and make a choice about how to be healed before our healing can begin.

¹ At least eighteen hundred years; see the comments of Origen (c. 185-254 a.d.) in *Ancient Christian Commentary of Scripture: Old Testament*, ed. Marco Conti (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 2008), p.168.

At the beginning of his story, Naaman knew he needed healing, but just barely. In the Syrian world he was not yet forced into quarantine; his health had not been taken away from him.² Yet though his leprosy was not mortal it did not reflect the great favour granted by his king; it was no evidence of his mighty exploits. This Naaman had to speak aloud; at least this one truth he had to admit.

But something else was wrong.

Naaman seems to have had no idea that it was the Lord God of Israel that had granted him his victories over Israel, a wayward people who had rejected their Lord. Naaman was bereft of spiritual insight. Naaman did not understand the way of God; his deepest sickness lay below his leprous skin.

At the beginning of his story the peasant in the dirt at the feet of Jesus knew he was a leper and more. The ritual law of Israel was unmistakable, and so he had for months or years shared no company with the healthy.³ Wherever he went, the crowd always stepped back.

This leper lived a life cut off from society, alone except for those like him.⁴ Unlike Naaman, this leper knew his deeper need. He was willing to let go of what sometimes seems like dignity to us for the chance to lay hold on deep healing.

Because God's grace goes before us all, the mighty Syrian commander was offered a moment of grace through the kindness of a stranger, a Jewish girl he had taken on a border raid into Israel, and then enslaved. She told her mistress, Naaman's wife, about the prophet in the north of Israel, Samaria. Her mistress told the great man that in the country he had crushed there was a man who could heal him.

But the moment of grace was almost lost.

The servant girl had told her mistress, the mistress her husband, her husband the Syrian king. And the Syrian king wrote the Israelite king and there the whole thing almost ended as many things often do, with the international demand of a mighty nation put to the weak: 'look here's some money; create a programme and fix our problem.' The healer was not mentioned; the healing was nowhere in sight

² 'The leprosy of Naaman...did not disfigure him or disqualify him from military office or entering temples in his homeland,' Ziony Zevit, '1 Kings' in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: OUP, 2004), p.735.

³ For the Jewish law applicable in the days of Naaman and Jesus, see *Leviticus* 13.1-14.57. Biblical leprosy was not the 'Hanson's disease' of today in which limbs might deteriorate to the point of loss, but more like the severe rash associated with psoriasis; see Peter J. Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), p.193.

⁴ Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p.102-103.

The Israelite king, dependent on the good will of the Syrians who might at any moment punish him again, hung his head but did not call on God. Yet a moment of grace arose again, in the mocking words of the prophet of God; ‘Let Naaman come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.’

But the moment of grace was almost lost.

Naaman, the great commander, travels on with his shekels of gold and his horses and chariots and entourage and stops at Elisha’s door to make payment. Elisha does not dignify him with his appearance but sends a message; wash not just once but seven times in the Jordan and you will be healed.

Naaman rages; is not his nation greater, his rivers more mighty? Has he come all this way to be mocked by a poor holy man in a nation under his heel? He walks away and shouts; ‘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!’

Yet one more moment of grace arises.

Naaman’s humble servants approach him with clear minds, unclouded by power and dignity, and ask him if it is really so hard to wash in the river, wherever it might be. And he does.

And only then does he understand his deeper sickness.

In the verse that follows the last verse of today’s reading Naaman says: ‘Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel.’⁵ The spiritual healing he did not know he had been missing had been granted to him. It had been granted to him because in the end he took up the moments of grace that came from God through humble means.

We don’t know the name of the leper who knelt before Jesus but in the course of a few words we know all about his spiritual state. Any moment of grace was to be taken up, and not let go of. ‘If you choose, you can make me clean.’ There were meant to be no complications.

He broke through protocols and conventions and social laws to present himself directly to Jesus. He knew Jesus could heal, though he didn’t care how. He knew what Jesus would do, because Jesus was God’s grace: ‘you can make me clean’. And of course Jesus did heal him, touching the untouchable.

Erasmus put it his way, about Jesus and the leper: ‘Genuine faith is not wordy and evangelical love confers favour willingly.’⁶ This is the summary of the story.

⁵ *II Kings* 5.15

⁶ This is from his *Paraphrase on Mark*, trans. Erika Rummel (Toronto: UTP, 1988), p.28.

To choose healing is not to choose how God will heal us, or to attempt to present ourselves with the job already done.

St. Augustine interpreted for us St. Paul's sporting metaphor from today's epistle: 'It is not from the one who wills, nor from the one who runs, but from God who has mercy that we obtain what we hope for and reach what we desire.'⁷

We all desire healing. It is God's work through Jesus Christ. What we offer is our sin, our weakness. What God offers is the work of grace in our life.

We shall not all be healed of all sickness and disease and pain in this life. That awaits the full power of the resurrection that will re-create the universe and us with it.

But there is more healing possible under our skin than we might imagine is now possibly needed in each of us.

In the end might Naaman was healed and so was the humble leper. But we know which story is by far the better.

Probably today, and certainly this week, new moments will come, moments of grace. If we know we need healing, we will be able to take them up.

Moments of grace may come through a child's words, or in the face of a beggar on Barrington Street, or in the words or the face of someone we think we hate or who hates us.

Which way will we choose? We know where the Eucharist, where all our worship takes us, where our faith wants to lead us; to kneel with the man who knelt before Jesus. Amen.

⁷ In the *Ancient Christian Commentary of Scripture: Mark*, ed. Thomas Oden and Christopher Hall (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1998), p. 88.