

“Healing Choices”

*Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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II Kings 5:1-14, Mark 1:40-45

Our first passage is from the Old Testament book of II Kings. In this passage, we are introduced to Naaman, a general in the army of the King of Aram (which was located in modern day Syria). Naaman is suffering from a skin disease of some sort. The text calls it leprosy, but it was not necessarily what we call leprosy today. It was not necessarily Hansen’s Disease. In the Bible, a variety of skin conditions were labeled as leprosy. The important thing to know is that such skin conditions led people to be viewed as outcasts. One of Naaman’s servants, an Israelite girl, tells him about the prophet Elisha, who she says can cure him. Listen to how the story unfolds, especially for how Naaman initially reacts to Elisha’s instructions and for what happens after he follows them. *Read II Kings here.*

Our second passage is from the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark, verses 40-45. Here we meet another leper, who having likely heard stories about Jesus’ power to heal, addresses Jesus not so much with a request as with a statement of faith. Pay particular attention to how this story differs from the story of Naaman. *Read Mark here.*

Yesterday morning - right on time - this week’s issue of *Time* magazine (with its cover story on “How Faith Can Heal”) arrived at our home. I say right on time. Actually, it might have been more helpful if it had arrived a week ago! Nonetheless, long before it arrived, I knew I was going to be talking about healing today. When the assigned Old Testament lectionary text is the story of the healing of Naaman, the Syrian general, and the Gospel reading is the story of the healing of a leper who approaches Jesus in great trust, how can any preacher worth his or her salt avoid talking about how faith can heal? And yet, most of us in mainline churches are at least a little cautious about taking on that subject.

It is not because we haven’t seen evidence of how faith can heal. You can’t spend much time in ministry without coming across someone who has experienced scientifically improbable healing - the tumor that shrinks or disappears after prayer, the cancer that against all odds goes into remission, the affliction that mysteriously fades in response to the supplications and intercessions of people of faith. I have known people in every congregation I’ve served who have experienced just that sort of healing. Our own Greg Stanton can tell you about how he asked for prayers after being diagnosed with cancer, and how in prayer and the laying on of hands he felt a palpable warmth come into his body. At his next doctor’s appointment, the scans showed no trace of cancer.

Two Wednesday nights ago, Mac Fedge (Gloria Rothmayer’s grandson) came to our Congregational Care committee meeting. Mac came, with his mom and dad, to say thank you for the prayers Immanuelites have lifted on his behalf over the course of the past seven years. In 2001, Mac was nearly killed in a car accident. He was hit head on by another driver who had crossed the yellow line. The damage to Mac’s brain and his body was so severe that at least one doctor said the best case scenario for recovery was that he would be in a vegetative state and he would never talk or walk again. Brain

scans today would show you that there is nothing left where Mac's frontal lobes should be. And yet, on the first Wednesday night of February, Mac Fedge walked into the Meeting House, sat down, and told the Congregational Care Committee his story, attributing his recovery in large part to the power of prayer (including the way prayers gave him the strength to do the hard work associated with his rehabilitation). Does Mac have the same mental capacity, the same emotional range, or the same physical agility he had before the accident? No. But Mac has a sense of humor, a twinkle in his eye, and a meaningful life. And, yes, I believe prayer had a lot to do with that.

But what makes most of us careful about talking about how faith can heal is our recognition that not every person for whom we pray experiences that sort of miraculous recovery. Part of being a pastor, or a part of a congregation period, is to recall those stories, too. Too many people die too young for us to really believe that fervent prayer always results in physical healing. Too many men and women of unquestionable devotion die after beseeching God earnestly for their own healing to think that faith always eventuates in bodies getting well. Especially when we consider how often the prayers of those who succumbed to death were joined with the prayers of hundreds and thousands of other believers.

In those circumstances, pastors and other people of faith are often called on to answer the unanswerable question, "Why? Why him and not me? Why did this disease strike me or my loved one? Why do people have to suffer at all? Where is God in all of this?"

The leper in today's story from Mark was undoubtedly struggling with these questions and had been since the day that dreaded disease had first presented itself. He had probably wrestled those questions to the floor and come away with as good a set of answers as any of us ever find. We are human, not gods. We are mortal, in mortal bodies. And one thing about being mortal is that we will all, every one of us, one day die - no matter how much faith we possess. No one gets out of life alive. So the very fact that we are mortal means that physical healing isn't always a possibility.

The leper may have come to accept these answers which are about as good as any of us ever come to answering the question, "Why?" But one day he heard an interesting story about a man named Jesus who healed people it seemed were incurable. And the next day he heard two more stories. People were buzzing about this man who made lame people walk and blind people see. Some even said he threw out evil spirits and healed all kinds of sicknesses. And hearing these stories a small hope began to burn. He started to inquire after this Jesus, the healer. He asked one person and then another where he might be found. And he kept on asking until he searched Jesus out and went to him and fell at his feet. He stretched out his scabbed and scarred arms and said, "If you choose, you can heal me." It was a prayer.

At first reading, that statement may not seem like a prayer to you at all - more like a challenge. "I've heard about you, Jesus. Well, let's see your stuff." But it is actually a very profound prayer, one that acknowledges two things.

First, the prayer acknowledges that there is One who has the power to heal. When the man stretches out his hands for healing, it is with an attitude of total trust. When the leper says to Jesus, "You can heal me," that is an affirmation of faith. And that sort of faith in one's ability to be healed can make a difference. This week's *Time* magazine article speaks to how powerful trusting in a cure can be. It can

lead to real bodily changes. Scientific evidence points to how some brains have opened opiate receptors in response to fake pain pills, and boosted dopamine levels in response to sham Parkinson's surgery, and even prodded tumors to shrink in response to a drug that would otherwise be ineffective.

¹ To truly believe that God can heal you can make a significant difference in your prospects for healing.

But the affirmation, "You can heal me," is only part of the leper's prayer. The prayer also says, "If you choose." To say that was to acknowledge that any healing that would happen was in Jesus' hands. The leper believed that Jesus had power to do it, but what he was asking was whether or not Jesus would choose to do it. When the man with the skin disease stretches out his hands, it is with an attitude of total surrender.

The second part of that prayer is the hardest, both then and now. We are so used to being in control that getting to that humble place where you say, "Do with me what you will" to God or anyone else is difficult. When I think about that simple, profound prayer, "If you choose, you can make me well," I think about Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus knew his death was imminent and so he poured out his heart to God and said, "*Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Yet, not my will, but Your will be done.*"

Jesus trusted that God *could do* what he asked, but he had the courage and the devotion to pray, "Not what I choose, God, but rather what You choose." To pray that way is to acknowledge that there are many things in life over which we have no control. God has chosen to create the world in such a way that weather patterns sometimes create deadly storms, and viruses and bacteria sometimes cause diseases which can be terminal, and people's bodies wear out as they age, and human beings are free to hurt and to help each other in large and small ways through intention, negligence, and pure accident. To acknowledge that God chose to create the world in that way **is not to say** that God **directly causes** those things to happen. It is to say that God chose to create a world in which there are many free agents at work.

In a world like that **the only thing we ultimately have control over is the choices that we ourselves make in response to what happens to us**. Life deals us a set of genetic and environmental cards. It is up to us how we play the hand we are dealt, and how we respond to how the other cards around the table fall. In playing the hand, it is our choice. Do we choose the things that make way for healing, for peace, for hope, for love, for God - even when the cards don't go our way and we don't receive the results, the type of healing, we wanted? Or not?

This brings us to that other leper, Naaman, the commander of the army of the King of Aram. Naaman was a powerful man, but he had a couple of problems. His first problem was that he had a dreaded skin disease. This surely affected the way people looked at him and responded to him. Had he been an Israelite, he would have been considered unclean and unable to enter the temple for worship - he would have been cut off from the rest of the community. I imagine that leprosy would not have made him any more popular in Aram. Nevertheless, one of his servant girls, an Israelite, told him that she knew of a prophet back in her homeland who could heal him. What she didn't tell him was that he would have to humble himself to experience that healing.

This, of course, was his second problem. Naaman, being a general, was not big on total surrender. He was not a humble man. Let go and let God was not in his vocabulary. Oh, he wanted healing, but he wanted it his way, and he wanted it right now. So when the prophet Elisha sent word to him that he was to go wash seven times in the muddy Jordan River and then he would be healed, Naaman had a fit. Why had he bothered to come to this Israelite? There was a river in Aram, and it was cleaner. What a waste of time!

After Naaman stormed around a bit, his servants talked him down and encouraged him to give Elisha's prescription a try. "Sir, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? Then why not do what he says and go and wash and be clean?" In response to that question, Naaman had a choice to make. And when he chose to humble himself, lo and behold, he was healed.

As I think about Naaman and his initial reluctance to follow the commands of the prophet, I am reminded of people I have known who have resisted doctor's orders despite the fact that listening to what the doctor had to say was vital to their recovery. Some of us have a hard time calling a doctor in the first place, let alone following a doctor's orders. It can be hard to stay off your feet and not lift things after surgery. It is difficult to give up driving until the doctor gives the go ahead. And, those of us who have been through physical therapy of one sort or another know how tedious the recovery seems when it comes down to simple little exercises to regain one's strength, especially when doing them can be painful.

Up to this point, we've talked a lot about physical healing - and there are certainly some lessons that these leper stories can teach us about that. But it seems to me that these stories also teach us something about how we can heal emotionally and spiritually - and that is a healing that can be relied upon even when our bodies don't get well. Healing of that sort requires making choices, too.

It strikes me that leprosy and other skin diseases affect people's outsides. But some of the diseases (the dis-eases) that are most rampant in today's society are internal ones: pervasive anxiety, crippling depression, and overwhelming grief. And just like the regimen Naaman received from Elisha, the healing for these things often takes simple repetitive action.

As Naaman found, it is not always easy to do the simple thing, especially the thing that God would have us do for our healing. We know what it is, like Naaman, to favor the quick miraculous cure over the humbling messier healing that comes from doing simple things over and over.

Dealing with some mental and emotional diseases requires taking medication on a daily basis. But it also requires other, simple repetitive actions on our part. The depressed or bereaved person wants to feel better now, rather than hearing that every morning you get up and get yourself dressed and go about your day you move one step forward to healing. The person struggling with weight or diabetes wants some kind of pill or miracle diet rather than the simple day to day grind of choosing the right things to eat and opting to exercise. And I'm not saying this is easy. When you are sick or hurting or emotionally suffering it is very difficult indeed to trust that through the repetition of simple acts healing will come.

And yet isn't that often how God works for healing in our lives? We seldom see the glamorous cure and are more often cured to the unglamorous regimen. Now let me be clear here. I am not saying that miraculous cures don't happen, in the emotional and spiritual realms as well as in the physical. They do, so don't be discouraged in your prayers for healing.

But the cure, the healing, might not come in just the way you have it pictured. Cures are often slow and messy, like Naaman's repetitive dips into the muddy water. There is muddy water indeed for people who are undergoing chemotherapy, addiction treatment, and physical therapy. Most cures involve some muddy water. And what about the muddy water of counseling, confession, and grief? These can bring about healing that is just as real and life-changing. But you won't get emotional healing without dipping in the muddy water either.

Friday night, Bill Moyers interviewed Nikki Giovanni, the African-American poet and distinguished professor of English at Virginia Tech.² Giovanni, who brought the Virginia Tech community to its feet in tearful applause when she spoke at the memorial service following the killings there two Aprils ago, talked about how healing love can be borne out of grief. I couldn't help but think of Naaman dipping in that muddy water when she read this poem, a poem she wrote in reflecting on her father's death. It is titled, ironically enough, "Choices."

*If i can't do
what i want to do
then my job is to not
do what i don't want
to do*

*It's not the same thing
but it's the best i can
do*

*If i can't have
what i want . . . then
my job is to want
what i've got
and be satisfied
that at least there
is something more to want*

*Since i can't go
where i need
to go . . . then i must . . . go
where the signs point
through always understanding
parallel movement
isn't lateral*

*When i can't express
what i really feel
i practice feeling
what i can express
and none of it is equal*

*I know
but that's why mankind
alone among the animals
learns to cry³*

For us to receive physical, spiritual, or emotional healing we have to make choices. Naaman could have simply walked away from the opportunity for wholeness. God says, "If you choose to follow my path of grace, you can be healed." But in order to say yes, we must understand that God's path may not be the one we envisioned for ourselves.

So often we have it all decided. The only way healing can happen is if my relationship gets fixed. The only way healing can happen is if my loved one gets physically well. The only way healing can happen is if I can gain control of this person or that situation. Fix me, God, but fix me the way I want you to, and do it now.

But God's call to wash in the muddy water is a different path. It is not a quick fix or a path easily followed. It may not even lead to exactly what we had in mind. We are mortal, after all, in mortal bodies. And our lives are filled with other fallible, fragile human beings who sometimes hurt us in ways that leave us suffering, emotionally and spiritually.

So while God does not promise that every person will receive the miraculous instantaneous cure of the leper who approached Jesus or even that we will always be healed in the way we desire, God does promise this. If you choose to follow God's path of grace for your life, you will find healing and wholeness. Because I really believe what is on the front of the bulletin today. "Whenever we open ourselves to the activity of the Holy Spirit, some kind of healing takes place... Not all healing will be physical, of course; often healing comes in the emotional and spiritual realms where God's love is able to overcome every obstacle."⁴ God will heal. God will heal.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ This information is gleaned from Jeffrey Kluger's article "The Biology of Belief" in the February 23, 2009 issue of *Time* magazine.

² See Moyers' interview with Giovanni here: <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/02132009/watch2.html>

³ You can hear Giovanni read her poem on the webcast—and a transcript of the poem is printed there. I would strongly encourage adding some of Giovanni's books of poetry to your shelf. You can find this particular poem in her collection *Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day* or in *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni 1968-1998* (New York: Harper 2003), pp. 269-270.

⁴ Tilda Norberg and Robert D. Webber, *Stretch Out Your Hands* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1998).