

2 Kings 5:1-14

Mark 1:40-45

In the name of the one, holy and undivided Trinity. Amen.

Today on this sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, we hear two stories about the healing of lepers: Naaman's story is recounted in the Book of Second Kings and the author of Mark's Gospel tells us about an unnamed man who begs Jesus for cleansing. The leprosy spoken of in these stories is not the disease we know as Hansen's disease today. That disease was not known in biblical times. According to commentary in the *Jewish Study Bible*, the condition translated as "leprosy" afflicted not only humans but also fabrics and building materials. It rendered them ritually unclean. In humans, the main symptom was scale-like eruptions of the skin and it appeared as mold or mildew in cloth or building materials. In humans it was seen as a gradual erosion of the skin, leading, unless the patient recovered, to the ultimate disintegration of the flesh, which was taken as a sign of the gradual escape of life. The person afflicted with it was looked upon as potentially dead. If a person did recover, purification rituals were necessary to restore the healed sufferer to society.

In the Old Testament reading we meet Naaman, an Aramean, who "though a great warrior, was a leper." Apparently his skin disease did not disfigure him or disqualify him from military service or entering temples in his homeland. He was, in fact, the commander of the army of the King of Aram, an important man and high in the king's favor. We learn that a young girl, who had been captured during a raid in Israel, was serving as an attendant to Naaman's wife. She apparently knew of

someone who could cure Naaman: "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." Hearing this, and probably in great haste, Naaman went to the king of Aram and shared the news. The king said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." Naaman set out with rich gifts to pay for his cure and the royal letter. When the king of Israel read the letter, he knew there was no way *he* could cure leprosy. In despair, he tore his clothing, crying "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!" Hearing of the king's distress, the prophet Elisha tells the king to send Naaman to him.

Naaman comes to Elisha's house with all his retinue, expecting an extravagant, showy cure. Elisha disappoints him, however, and doesn't even appear at the door----instead he just sends a messenger to tell Naaman to go and bathe seven times in the Jordan River. Naaman is enraged and stalks off, grumbling about Elisha's off-handed treatment of him and the superiority of Syrian rivers. His servants however, save the day by saying patiently 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'?" So finally Naaman went down and immersed himself in the Jordan as Elisha had instructed, and his flesh was restored and he was clean. Realizing that it is God who has healed him, not the river water or Elisha, Naaman goes back to the prophet and exclaims, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except Israel."

Several things struck me about this story. First, in his arrogance, Naaman almost missed being healed. He had such a clear idea of how he thought he should be healed that at first he refused Elisha's simple instructions. His sense of entitlement and his grandiose expectations blinded him. But second, Naaman is actually willing to stop and listen and to recognize when he is acting foolishly. And the advice Naaman listens to comes from people at the margins of society: first, from a slave girl seized during a raid on Israel, next Elisha, and then Naaman's own servants. By attending to peripheral voices, Naaman is able to break through his own arrogance and preconceptions and find healing in a totally unexpected place. How many times do **we** dismiss or discount voices we hear speaking from the margins? How many times do **we** miss being healed?

It is certainly an outcast from society who comes to Jesus in the reading we heard from Mark's Gospel. He too is a leper. According to Leviticus, if a person is judged by a priest to be afflicted with leprosy, he "shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp." According to one commentator, "the leper was essentially a corpse haunting the edges of the community he could no longer enter."

In his furtive existence on the edges of society, had this man heard of Jesus' healings and casting out of demons? Surely he must have yearned to be rid of his own affliction! Even his fear of the law was not enough to keep him away from Jesus once he saw him. That he is certain Jesus can heal is clear. He says, "If you choose,

you can make me clean.” Jesus responds, “I do choose. Be made clean!” The author of Mark tells us that “immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.” What a simple interchange...and yet what power pulses through it...the healing power of God...a God who *chooses* to heal...

And yet, look a little closer...Jesus doesn't just speak to the leper to heal him...he touches him: “moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him.” Jesus bridges the unimaginable gulf between an outcast and himself with his own body. In his new translation and commentary on Mark, Joel Marcus finds the translation “becoming incensed” preferable to “moved with pity,” suggesting that Jesus' anger “at the disease or the demon that has caused it is mixed with his compassion for the man whom it has attacked, and by his gesture of touching the man he even risks contracting ritual impurity himself.”

After cleansing the leper, according to Dr. Marcus' translation, “Jesus, growling at him, immediately cast him out and said to him, “See that you don't say anything to anyone, but go and show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a witness to them.” Dr. Marcus points out that Jesus' growling is congruent with his anger and “cast out” is the “same term that is used for the exorcism of demons” in other passages. He posits that while it is puzzling that Jesus would treat “the man as if he were the disease,” perhaps here Mark wants to emphasize exorcism rather than narrative coherence.

The man, newly cleansed, does not obey Jesus' instructions to say nothing. Instead he tells anybody and everybody about his healing. It is not clear if he even goes through the ritual of restoration with a priest. It is ironic that while the man

who was an outcast moves about freely, proclaiming his cure, "Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country..." Jesus moves to the margins of society. And yet, in spite...or perhaps because of that, "people came to him from every quarter." In Luke 4:18-19 Jesus declares, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because [God] has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. [God] has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Jesus stands with the **outcast**---with **us** when we feel like outcasts---in our isolation, our fear, our anger, our alienation, our lack of purpose, our shame, our sinfulness---and he bridges the gap between us and himself with his body and blood. He *chooses* to heal us in ways we don't even know how to ask for and sends us forth to share his love. When we gather for Eucharist, the bread and wine, Christ's body and blood, will unite us with him and with each other. As we go forth from this table, may we listen to voices from the margins of life, for that is where Jesus stands---and may we continue to be healed in deep ways we never expected and by all manner of surprising persons, encountering in them this Jesus, this God, this Spirit---that blows where it will... Amen.

