

Sermon for Sunday, February 12, 2012 2 Kings 5:1-14, Mark 1:40-45 "Healed or Transformed?"

Our readings from the Old Testament and the Gospel are linked together by a disease: leprosy.

It's important to understand a little bit about the disease, because this is a little complicated.

When we think of leprosy, we think of folks who just a few decades ago would have been isolated in leper colonies. We would imagine people who would lose body parts – fingers, lips, noses, toes – whose disease would be highly contagious. Nowadays there are multi-drug treatments that render a person's disease non-communicable within a couple of weeks of starting treatment, and transmission is generally more difficult than we originally thought.

But leprosy was a blanket term in the ancient world that covered a broad range of skin disorders. Some were as aggressive and contagious as what we now call Hansen's disease, some were simply eczema. What we call leprosy wasn't introduced into the Middle East until 300 BC, when Alexander's army brought it back from India.

But this thing that was called leprosy then was a frightening disease because it could be disfiguring, and in a religious tradition that prized ritual purity, a visible skin disorder was viewed as a sign of uncleanness, of impurity. The Book of Leviticus has a whole chapter, chapter 13, about the diagnosis of and ritual response to what the ancient Jews called "tzaarath" or a skin disease that they called leprosy. Only a priest could diagnose. Only a priest could order confinement. Only a priest could say someone was cured of his disease. And over it all was this sense that this was a physical manifestation of something spiritually wrong within a person.

It was this kind of leprosy, rough patches of whitened skin, that affected Naaman, the powerful commander in our first reading. Naaman didn't want to be disfigured – he believed it lessened his ability to exert his power over those around him. He wanted a solution. And remarkably, Naaman's wife just happened to have a Israelite servant girl who knew of the prophet Elisha, and of Elisha's power in calling for God's healing.

But Naaman was the kind of guy who wouldn't speak to some odd religious nut in a subjugated county...he went to his boss, the king of Aram, who then wrote directly to the king of Israel, in an exchange that is both funny and sad at the same time. The king of Aram, who, we recall, had subjugated the Israelites, sent a letter to the king of Israel to get Elisha to fix Naaman's problem. He sent it with Naaman, and with some pretty amazing gifts – ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and a rich wardrobe of fine garments.

Now put yourself in the place of the king of Israel. His conqueror sends him this letter, with all the rich gifts, and he knows he has to deliver the cure. But even though the king of Israel may not be an effective warrior, he knows his theology. "Who am I? God? I can't cure this guy. This conquering king is trying to pick a fight with me by giving me an impossible request."

Somehow Elisha gets a message that this drama is going on in the palace, and he sends his own message – poor king of the Israelites is caught in the middle again – saying "don't fret. Send him to me, and I'll show him what a prophet does." I'd bet that the king of Israel breathes a sigh of relief, getting Naaman out of town. The passage from 2 Kings doesn't say anything, though, about sending all the goodies from the king of Aram with him.

Naaman goes off in his chariot to Elisha's house. And then Elisha does something very interesting. He doesn't go out to meet him. Major insult, that! He sends out an assistant, like spending a small fortune to see Dr. Oz and him sending out a little nursing assistant with a message. "Just go wash up in the river, then go to the priest so they can certify you as cured."

Naaman isn't used to being treated this way. He's used to snapping his fingers and having everyone say "Yes, sir!" And he is furious. He stomps off, saying that if this was all he was going to get from Elisha, he could have stayed home. But his servants, those patient and wise people, convince him to give it a try. And he does, and he is healed.

Contrast this with what happens with the leper in the gospel. He's just a beggar by the side of the road. If you asked him why he had leprosy, he'd probably have said, "I don't know. Maybe I did something bad, or my father did something bad. It doesn't much matter. All that matters is that I have it, and I can't be with anyone, and all I can do is beg for a few coins to survive." Naaman never thought he was responsible, he just wanted the problem fixed, and he would do what it took to fix it.

He sees Jesus approaching. We don't know how he knows that Jesus is the person to go to for healing, but he does. He is unclean. He shouldn't approach anyone. But he takes the risk, and goes directly to the one who can help him. No kings as intermediaries, as Naaman did. Just a sick man taking a risk. And Jesus is no doubt surprised by his approach. In that place, a leper keeps his distance. But Jesus shouldn't be. This is the third in a close series of healing stories in the Gospel of Mark. Word is spreading of his power to heal. But here is this unclean man, and he says "if you choose, you can heal me." A clear recognition of Jesus' power. Jesus looks at him, shocked by the leper's boldness. He responds almost without thinking..."I do choose. Go, you are healed. Make an offering at the temple and present yourself to the priests, but say nothing about what has happened here." A direct healing, no prophetic intermediary. A risky request, without the protection of being a powerful commander in service to the King. A humble man expecting nothing, unlike the proud military man demanding results and attention by the healer. They are both healed – God is more merciful than any of us deserve – but are they changed by their healing?

We might think that these stories are about miraculous healings. On one level they are. Both men are healed.

But on a deeper level, it is not about the miracle, it is about what happens before and after the encounter. How do we approach God and ask for something? Do we act like Naaman, swaggering and insisting? Or are we like the man approaching Jesus, humbly requesting, braced for a "no" but hoping for a "yes?"

And after we have that encounter with the divine, whatever the results, how are we changed? Our skin may be clear, like both these men, but are our hearts transformed? Do we head back to our homes tempted to share the miracle we have been given, or do we simply march back as if we expected what we got all along?

Healing, that miraculous gift, takes many different forms. God touches us and tries to fix what is broken in us, whether it is patchy skin or cancer or depression or anger. Do we accept his healing grace and rejoice in his ability to reshape us, or do we simply say that we are better because of something that we did, or some doctor did, or a medicine did? Do we brag about how smart we were to read up on what we needed on the Internet. Or do we simply quietly thank God for his willingness to keep with us, regardless of whether we are physically healed or spiritually transformed.

Healing is a complicated thing. We are changed. But more important than a change is how we respond to it, how we then use it to be witnesses to Christ's love in us and in the world.

We can be Naaman. We can be the poor soul in Mark's gospel, whose name we do not know. Which one do you think reacted as our God would want? When you are changed, when you are healed, when you are lifted up, which one will you be?

Amen.