

Two Sundays remain in our sermon series on the prophets, Elijah and Elisha. Today we continue with a story involving Elisha and the healing power of God. **PRAY. READ.** 2 Kings 5:1-19a.

I'm uncomfortable with healing stories in the Bible. It's not that I don't like healing or that I don't believe in a God who heals. Because I do believe in a God who heals. It's just when it comes to healing, we usually think of physical healing and not everyone physically heals while on this earth. We may have witnessed a healing of one in our midst and yet there are some here who have lost a loved one to cancer or other horrific diseases or tragic accidents. Diseases are the great equalizer, as they don't discriminate. When I was a chaplain in the hospital, I quickly learned that healing comes in many different forms. Healing can be physical, spiritual/ emotional, or relational. It's not always an either/or. Healing can be both seen and unseen. Diseases and illnesses are awful and many of them happen for reasons unknown, and I believe that God's heart is the first to break with news of people suffering from disease or illness, as well as many other things. Diseases and illnesses leave folks tired, afraid, and vulnerable-maybe like Naaman found himself in today's biblical story?

Naaman was the general- the commander of the Syrian army, a mighty warrior, a much revered and decorated soldier. He was not just a military powerhouse but also a politician. He was a powerful man. Naaman was not a local guy but a **foreigner**. Not just a foreigner but an **enemy** and **conqueror** to the people of Israel. Think about it. What if Putin or Kim Jong-

un asked to come to the US seeking a cure for their disease? What would be your response? That's exactly why grace is offensive and unfair (unless then the grace is for us or someone we love, right?). Naaman was also a pagan. He worshiped other gods. And yet, we're told that the Lord had given him great victory to Aram (which we now know as Syria). This strong commander of the Syrian army also had leprosy. In those days, leprosy was well known and those who had it were considered to be unclean, social outcasts. Leprosy barred those who had it from the synagogue and from public events- at least those who observed purity laws. I would imagine that Naaman had to make a lot of public appearances as the commander of the Syrian Army, and I also imagine it would be hard just to look in the mirror let alone to have people looking at you while wearing their judgmental and pity glances on their faces or treating you like you had the cooties and avoiding you at all cost. There was no hiding leprosy. The text doesn't reveal how many unsuccessful treatments that Naaman had previously sought out to cure his leprosy. We don't know. We do know that this great warrior was being defeated by a body covered with leprosy and was desperately seeking a cure. According to scholars, this isn't the type of leprosy, known today as Hansen's Disease, where limbs rot and fall off. No, this is something more like psoriasis with its symptoms of flaking skin, discoloration of body hair, and the exposure of flesh through the skin- more of a social, than physical, disability (Dr. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Lives and Ministries of Elijah and Elisha*). As my OT professor says, "leprosy in the Bible becomes a metaphor for all kinds of diseases and malfunctions. These are some of the things that might look like leprosy today: those who suffer

from addiction that has power over them, those who are in a failing marriage, those who have a broken relationship with a child or parent, those who made poor investments and a very close to the edge, those that make bad choices that seem to spiral out of control” (WB, *The Song of an Ex-Leper*, p. 332). Leprosy can be so overwhelming that it overshadows an individual. It can also overshadow a nation: such as the leprosy of “hate and brutality and violence and mass shootings and race and poverty” (WB, p. 332).

Entering into today’s story is the often over-looked Israelite slave girl- the one who was captured by Naaman’s people, and given to Naaman’s wife to be her maidservant. I can’t help but to think how bitter and angry I would be if I were her. Help her enemy? Do what? One can only imagine her heartbreak and longing to return home and be reunited with her family. It's a good thing she doesn't think like me because it was this unnamed Israelite slave girl, who INVITES Naaman (through her mistress, his wife) to go to her homeland in Samaria and see the prophet who could cure him. She takes the high road. Maybe because she senses Naaman’s desperation? This young, unnamed girl, who is deemed as powerless, has a story to tell and a life-changing, grace-filled invitation for Naaman. She knows the way to his healing through the God of Israel. And for some reason, Naaman, the powerful yet desperate warrior- who more than likely had been everywhere, tried almost everything, decides to listen to his wife’s maidservant and go to enemy territory to see this prophet about a cure. That is definitely God at work because how else would the commander of

the Syrian army listen to an Israelite slave girl! This slave girl is a powerful vessel for God! Let's pause for a moment- because of this girl's witness and faith, the grace of God extends beyond the borders of Israel to a gentile- once again.

Although Naaman listened to this girl, he assumed that this prophet of whom she spoke would be found in the King of Israel's court because obviously that is where all the important, powerful people hang out. So...Naaman, seeking help, goes through the proper channels of power to get himself an appointment with the prophet, so he thinks. Therefore, he prepares to go and see the king of Israel who surely knows of this prophet if the slave girl did. First he asks his boss, the King of Aram, to write the king of Israel, who Syria had recently defeated in a battle, a letter asking for Naaman to be cured. Now Damascus, where Naaman lived, was a good distance Northwest from Samaria, where Elisha resided. But compared to the physical distance, the barriers of foreigner, warrior and enemy were much greater. "Naaman left his country and set out for Israel hoping to be cured. However, he incorrectly thought God's miracle of grace could be purchased, for he took ten talents of silver, 6000 sheckels of gold and ten sets of clothing. This general and king wanted Naaman to be healed in the worst way, to say the least" (Kaiser). When Naaman reached the courts of the King of Israel, he handed him the letter. The King of Israel, upon reading the letter, began to panic and tore his clothes. You don't have to know much about the Bible to know that a king tearing his clothes is never a good thing. Tearing of the clothes was usually the indication of grief or righteous

indignation or sometimes, in the case of a king, it meant the giving up of authority. The king of Israel is quite upset that he isn't God- who gives life or death- and therefore can't cure Naaman of leprosy. He knows only of political power. What a ridiculous and impossible request! Why would someone expect him to cure leprosy? Surely, the king of Aram must be picking a fight with him!

Well somehow word of the king's behavior got back to Elisha, the prophet, and he sent a message to the king to send Naaman on over to his house in order that Naaman *learn that there is a prophet in Israel*. So Naaman, along with his horses and chariots, went to Elisha's house, as the king must have given him directions because there was no GPS. I imagine it was quite the traffic jam on those long, dirt roads, and I'm sure Elisha's neighbors were all abuzz about this foreigner coming to see him along with his flashy entourage. Being a southerner who was taught hospitality, one would expect to be greeted with some sweet tea and some cookies. But not Elisha. Naaman arrives- I would imagine exhausted and vulnerable - desperately seeking a cure for his illness. And when he arrives at the great prophet's house, Elisha doesn't even open the door. He sends his messenger out with a simple instruction for Naaman. "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." Really? I wonder if that sounded a little like "Take two aspirin and call me in the morning" (WB, p. 331). Naaman was ticked and probably devastated at the same time-that he had come all this way- gone to all these lengths- and for what?- a dip in a dirty, shallow river? So he does

what many of us would do, and he throws a fit before God and everybody! He wanted the royal treatment. Couldn't Elisha just wave his hand over me and I'm healed? Doesn't he know who I am? And how dare he suggest that nasty, muddy, puny river Jordan when we've got way better rivers back home in Damascus. Sounds like Naaman needs a dose of humility?! This reminds me of a true story from some years ago. The governor of Alaska was out and about- visiting in a nursing home. He approached a woman and they began talking. After some time, the governor asks, "Do you know who I am?" The woman very kindly responds, "No. But if you go to that front desk right there, they'll give you your name AND your room #!" Ahhh...humility. This also reminds me of a quote this week from a luncheon I attended. Maya Angelou once said, "Grace is like a lake full of drinkable water, right outside your door. But you stay inside and die of thirst." Naaman's stubbornness almost got in the way of his healing- none of us know anything about that. But then Naaman's servants, who are also vessels of God, take a risk and approach their master. Isn't it always interesting whom God chooses to be vessels? Even though they're servants, it doesn't stop them from ever so gently yet right in Naaman's face, calling him out and challenging him. So desperate- been there tried almost everything- Naaman humbled himself and did what Elisha suggested, and he came out of the water, after 7 dips, changed in more ways than just his skin. He was restored...healed...made whole. He now knows that "there is no God in all the earth except in Israel" (v. 15). Notice that Elisha didn't play favorites or require Naaman to be a believer. Naaman- once again- tried to thank Elisha by giving him lots of gifts. But Elisha quickly declined. For "this

was all of God's grace, not a bit of it was from works" (Kaiser). And Elisha tells Naaman to go in peace.

Upon hearing this story, we hopefully come to realize that Naaman's miracle is not about Naaman, nor Elisha, but about the unrivaled oneness of the God of Israel. Yet, we forget to give credit where credit is due, and we forget that God uses the most unusual suspects to bring about God's purpose. Yet, history repeats herself. We don't love our enemies, and we despise being reminded to do so. In Luke's Gospel, we're told that Jesus uses the example of Naaman's healing- a foreigner and an enemy, in his sermon and the people listening to Jesus become outraged and tried to throw him off a cliff (4:27)! This kind of obedience to living God's command to love neighbor and enemy alike is uncomfortable and hard, and it may just be a vessel to heal modern-day leprosy. For God's love restores, and "the God of grace is not yet finished with the healing work in the world. And, gathered siblings in faith, neither are we" (WB, p. 335)! Therefore, let us not be so stubborn and listen with humility and obey the Lord our God. Amen.