

GRACE IN ORDINARY PLACES

2 Kings 5:1-14

Mark 1:40-45

Real life is unpredictable and full of interruptions. The church is not immune to real life. We organize our worship, print an "Order of Worship," and hope that everything goes as planned. But real life doesn't follow a bulletin. In a large and very formal church a particular woman visited one Sunday who just wasn't with the program. She kept shouting out "Amen!" and "Praise God!" during the sermon. One of the ushers hushed her, but she kept shouting "Amen" until finally the usher approached her and, in a loud whisper asked, "Madam, what are you doing?" "I'm praising the Lord," she said. To which he responded, "Well, knock it off, church is no place for that sort of thing."

Both the Old and New Testament readings concern the disease of leprosy. In a world and a time in which the disease has all but been eradicated except in small pockets, we perhaps cannot appreciate the fear that accompanied this word in the ancient world of Jesus. It was a red flag word. It brought about the same responses as the Plague did in the 13th Century, or Small Pox in the 18th Century, or AIDS in the 20th. It frightened them. They felt largely helpless against it, as indeed they were.

What happens when fear takes over is people do not act, they react. And reactions to leprosy were both swift and cruel. In times not far removed from our own people would be put to death by their own family. It seems incredible to us today, but on the edge of every large city in the ancient world huge pits were dug, and in those pits lived the lepers of the community.

And if, by some remote possibility, they did escape and venture out into the streets, they would be quickly greeted with shouts of "leper," accompanied by stones to make them keep their distance. In Jesus' day a leper by law could not get within fifty yards of a clean person. So this was the heart of the matter. Not only did these wretched poor people have to endure the trials of an incurable affliction, they also were isolated from society and kept from the community of faith. The horror of disease, a lifestyle of loneliness, isolation and hopelessness, where could they find hope? The only friend a leper had was God. In this life they were doomed. It was like a walking death.

This, then, is the background of the leper we meet this morning. What can we learn from this man's tragic story? Notice we're not even told his name, just that he is a "leper."

But Jesus always met men and women on the level of their need, regardless of who they were or what they had done. He met everyone as human beings, never as stereotypes. Stereotypes were as powerful then as they are now. Once a label is placed on a person the human being vanishes. Many labels were given to people in the New Testament -- such labels as tax collector, Samaritan, Roman soldier, prostitute, rich young man, Pharisee, sinner or publican. They all appear in the gospel narrative, and every time Jesus completely ignores the label and deals with the person. This is certainly true of his encounters with Matthew, Zacchaeus, the Samaritan woman at the well, the centurion, Mary Magdalene, and Nicodemus. David H.C. Read points out that "Jesus knew the ugly side of society -- the brutality of the occupation, the corruption of the tax system, the racial prejudices, the economic injustice, the religious hypocrisy, and the sexual degradation. But never once did these factors blind him to the reality of the human being, the unique son or daughter of God he saw before him."

The Old Testament story is the story of Naaman, the great general. Certainly it has to be one of the more entertaining of the many stories in the Old Testament. We tend to read stories from Scripture with a great deal of gravity, very seriously do we take these sacred stories. The Word of God, we say, and invoke God's blessing. But some stories, such as this one, are meant to be read a bit more lightly, with tongue somewhat in cheek.

The story tells us who this Naaman is: he's a gentile, a victorious general held in high esteem by his master, the King of Aram, which is now modern day Syria.

The General has won big victories, he raided Israel; he captured slaves. No doubt about it, Naaman is the hero of the moment, the great man, the favorite of the king, the victor in battle. Everything seems pretty good. But, Naaman had one little problem: he has contracted a dreaded incurable skin disease, which The Bible calls leprosy. What a contrast between his success and his sickness! And no one, not all the king's horses and all the king's men, can do anything about it. Not even the king himself can command good health for his favorite general. Maybe this isn't the success story it seemed to be. Naaman certainly can't command good health for himself. In fact, the powerful general may not even be fully in charge of his own household.

The mighty man doesn't like what he is told by the prophet Elisha. But his servant pleaded with him, saying, "Look, if you had been asked to do a difficult, great thing, that would be one thing, you would do it in a heartbeat. But all that God's prophet has asked of you is to go wash in the river and be clean. Why don't you give it a try?"

And the powerful, rich, mighty Naaman did as he was told. He submitted, washed himself in the Jordan, and he was healed.

The story seems to be a parable of what it's like to be made whole by God. In today's Gospel, Jesus heals another man with leprosy, this one unnamed, but a leper, just like the great man Naaman. Thus Jesus stands in the line of great prophets -- God's servants who perform God's healing work.

Remember that many people of his day looked at Jesus and were astonished that this common rabbi from Nazareth was a means of God's healing power.

We keep thinking that God is distant, high, mighty, and detached. In Christ, we keep being surprised that God is with us.

A man I know, is a respected business man, fairly high up the corporate ladder, and he found himself in a situation not unlike that of Naaman the Syrian general. He had struggled with what he called "a deceptive and tenacious enemy - alcoholism." That adversary had eroded his self-confidence and cast him into a place of loneliness, fear, and doubt.

Just as Naaman finally came to the place where he had to leave behind power and prestige and walk humbly into the Jordan, so this man I know had to leave behind power and prestige and walk into his own Jordan - except his was a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous.

The irony is that healing - whether of a disfiguring ailment of the flesh, or of alcoholism, or a broken spirit, or a crippling arrogance - healing seems always to begin when we acknowledge our vulnerability, our inability to be in charge, when we encounter a grace and power beyond our own.

We yield ourselves to another kind of power: instead of mastery, we begin to learn reliance on strange guides - in Naaman's case, it was his servants; in other cases it may be people who had been to the pit themselves, people who had died and come to life again through A.A. programs and faith in a higher power.

But this is a strange, off-center perspective for people born in modern, Western, post-Enlightenment culture, where reality is most often located deep within the individual, within the self. This perspective, this worldview, is the one we have all learned, this idea that we have no story but the story we choose for ourselves, that there is no truth but the truth we create for ourselves. Perhaps it is the peculiar weakness of the strong in all times and all places to decide what is true for them, to believe that it all depends upon them.

I have come to understand that reality is not found by looking within; rather, there is a reality, a truth, a power outside us, beyond us, coming at us - the astonishing, unexpected power of grace and new life seeking us, surprising us. Call it exodus. Call it resurrection. Call it God. Call it Spirit. But it is a different kind of power.

To be vulnerable, to learn to trust God and others is not giving up. Not at all. It is, however, surrender. There is a crucial difference between giving up and surrender. Giving up is lying down and believing there is no hope. Surrender is going forward not knowing what lies ahead, but trusting that God leads the way.

Healing is a mystery. We don't understand it. All we can do is to prepare our bodies to receive it. That's what doctors do. They do it with surgery, with medicine, and therapy. They prepare our bodies to receive the gift of healing. My cardiologist told me exactly that when I discussed my illness with him a couple of weeks ago. I thanked him for all

he had done for me. He said, "I can only do a few things, then we wait and hope that your body will respond."

Healing takes place in both body and spirit. Often it takes time, more time when we would like.

As a pastor I often speak and pray with and for people in crisis. People experience crises of all sorts that create a need for someone to walk with them as they go through a difficult time. Like most pastors, I move from crisis to crisis. There is always a need, always a serious illness, or death in the family among the congregation. And I try always to be there.

But sometimes people need someone to walk with them as they face that difficult issue for a more extended period of time. Here we have a dedicated and committed group of trained lay persons who have been commissioned as Stephen Ministers. Stephen Ministers are members of our congregation who listen, care, encourage, and provide emotional and spiritual support to people who are facing a crisis or going through tough times. The care one will receive is completely confidential, free, and many have found it very helpful.

In the training our Stephen Ministers receive, they are taught repeatedly that "we are the caregivers; God is the cure-giver." They aren't professional counselors, just ordinary Christians who care enough to go through the 50 hours of training and further continuing education and feel called by God to this ministry of caring, and allowing God to work through them as God provides the cure. If you – or a friend, family member, neighbor or co-worker have a need to receive care, talk to me or one of our Stephen Leaders. Our Stephen Ministers, with their care receivers, seek to be open to God's healing and mercy.

And that's all you can do too. You can prepare to receive the gift through faith, through prayer, and through openness to the power in creation that heals.

The Bible invites us to live in a strange new world. Pretty obviously, it's a world where power and personal influence and vast sums of money do not rule and where the VIPs who have these things deserve very little respect. That makes it very different from the world we live in most of the time. It's a world where the servants and the slaves and the downtrodden can be agents of God's mercy and grace while kings and presidents and generals look like fools. But just when you think you understand the rules for grace, you get fooled. Even the rich and the powerful can be touched by mercy.

Maybe there are no rules for grace. Maybe it's just there when you least expect it. Maybe that's why grace really is amazing.

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