

Summer Sermon Series – GOSPEL GEMS
“Can a Leper Be Cleansed?” (with Communion-served)
By Rev. James C. Ramsey

Texts: 2 Kings 5:1-14
Mark 1:40-55

Preached: 7/29/18

This morning we marvel at yet another “Gospel Gem.” Each Sunday this summer we take one particular story of Jesus to examine, in depth. We have found that each of these stories delights us with surprise, inspiration, or challenge. Today we highlight another selection from the Gospel of Mark...a seemingly simple story, until we look a little closer!

Can a Leper Be Cleansed? In the ancient world, the religious answer was, “Maybe...but it won’t be easy...or cheap.”

The fourteenth chapter of Leviticus devotes 57 verses to the detailed description of how a leper or a leprous house might be cleansed. It’s a complicated process involving the priest and multiple sacrifices and burnt offerings. The person being cleansed must shave off all his body hair and live outside his tent for seven days. And there is much more than even that involved.

Ask a regular person on the street, “Can a leper be cleansed?” and the straight-forward answer would be, “probably not.”

But the leper in Mark’s gospel believed differently. He came to Jesus, dropped to his knees, and declared, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” He knew Jesus could heal him...his only concern was, “would Jesus be willing?”

Of course Jesus was willing...healing is part and parcel of his mission – proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God!

The Gospel of Matthew reports, “they brought to Jesus many who were possessed with demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and cured all who were sick. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, “He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.”

Jesus came to heal, but also to liberate. Mark’s brief vignette about the leper functions to subvert the oppressive purity regulations of his day.

Common sense said that you shouldn’t touch a leper...because you’ll get infected. Jesus should have contracted the contagion, instead the leper becomes clean. This is not just a simple healing miracle. We are told Jesus is angry. After pronouncing the man’s wholeness, Jesus “snorting with indignation,” (the text really says), dispatches the man back to the priest.

Jesus’ frustrated anger only makes sense if the man had already been to the priests,

who for some reason had rejected his request. Deciding to make an issue out of it, Jesus sternly gives the leper detailed orders: See that you say nothing to anyone! Rather, go back and show yourself to the priest and make an offering prescribed by Moses for your cleansing as a witness against them.

The cleansed leper's task is not to publicize a miracle, but rather to help confront the oppressive ideological system of purity. Jesus protests the victimization of the leper, and all those who are poor and marginalized. Such a system, managed by the priests, subjected the physically ailing to a double oppression – not only were they second-class citizens, but they were forced to make special payments for their infirmities.

But the leper, so thrilled and overwhelmed with his healing, forgets or disregards Jesus' instruction, and goes public. Jesus becomes a marked man. His campaign for liberation upsets the status quo, provoking conflict with the scribes and Pharisees.

Can a leper be cleansed? God's people have always known the answer – we know the story of Naaman. We know with God all things are possible, even if it costs God much.

A leper can surely be cleansed. The real question is...can you? You likely don't have leprosy. But what ails you? What keeps you down, threatens to ruin you, seems a burden to heavy to bear? What system oppresses you? All of us get sick...getting sick, being sick is easy. But can we be cleansed? Are we willing to pursue healing...willing to approach the Lord of healing?

Healing can be a mysterious process. Doctors continue to be mystified by the fact that patients suffering from the same illness and given the same treatments will respond in a wide variety of ways. The presence of God's healing spirit coursing through our bodies and our souls is the un-prescribable variable that makes all healing possible.

Rick Dale Moore wrote, "God Saves: Lessons from the Elisha Stories." (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990) He used the story of Naaman's healing from leprosy to suggest necessary curative steps we must undergo, healing exercises our spirits must follow, in order to respond to God's healing touch.

First, Moore notes that Naaman's self-assured, commanding spirit must assume humility. The victorious general of the Aramean troops must admit that he has no power of command over the leprosy that afflicts him. Throughout the story, Naaman must go down, for he finds the cure he seeks only in lowly places. First the word of hope comes to him from the humble slave girl. Next he travels to the land he has only recently conquered in battle to seek the help of Israel's king and prophet. He "goes down" to Samaria - a dusty enclave, a far cry from Jerusalem's splendor. Finally, after listening to Elisha and then to his own servants, Naaman must "go down" to the muddy banks of the Jordan to bathe away his sickness.

Besides being humbled, going down, Moore notes that Naaman must also experience a

sense of transformation. His flesh was restored after bathing in the Jordan. Then, he "returns" to Elisha to pay his respects and give thanks. Restoring and returning suggest more than a simple physical healing, but also a spiritual conversion. Naaman returns to Elisha's front porch with both a healthy body and a transformed spirit.

With Elisha, Naaman must take a third and fourth step in order to demonstrate his true healing. Just as a broken bone is not healed until it can once again bear weight, neither can a body and spirit healed by God be completely transformed until the healer is thankfully acknowledged...and then the healed person must make a confession of faith.

Moore's astute biblical reflection surely resonates. The experience of healing in our lives is an active, not a passive, process. But the actions required of us, as demonstrated by Naaman, are not the kind of exercises we like to undertake. The progression from humility to transformation, to submission and confession, translates into a series of challenging spiritual postures for us.

What can we learn from a leper being cleansed? Can we, too experience healing? Are we willing to go down (even on our knees), turn around, kneel before and finally stand up to proclaim God's power and grace?

Real healing seems rare in our day, but how are we defining healing?...to whom do we attribute it?

I found this intriguing article in the journal Scientific American, titled "Measuring the Magic of Healing."

Three years into a brain cancer diagnosis that has an average survival rate of 18 months, Michael Bischoff of Minneapolis continues to heal. The 47-year-old husband and dad hopes for a cure, and for a long life. But with little control over the outcome of glioblastoma multiforme, the same cancer U.S. Sen. John McCain is fighting, Michael's main focus is on finding wholeness in each moment. Simply put: He has chosen to heal.

Michael considers what he loves the most—sitting beside the Mississippi River, biking in every kind of weather (yes, he wears a helmet), and settling into the sofa with his family—to be as important to his healing process as surgery, chemo and radiation.

"Even if I die tomorrow," Michael says, "I still want to celebrate miraculous healing today."

Liwanag Ojala is CEO of CaringBridge, the global nonprofit social network for families immersed in medical journeys. Many of us follow the progress of Noah Latronica on CaringBridge.

Ojala describes herself as "a constant witness to healing, in its miraculous, and ordinary, forms." She describes how her team watches, in awe, all the ways in which families become whole again, after diagnosis, illness, injury, premature birth ... every

health crisis imaginable. And some that are unimaginable. Through the online journal posts of patients and family caregivers, and the support from loved ones in response, she and her team members literally watch healing happen.

While researchers wrestle to define and understand “healing,” its power continues to happen in all sorts of forms, sometimes amazingly mending bodies, although not always, other times mending hearts and souls. “Healing enables families to move ahead,” Ojala says, “regardless of health outcome, with what remains.”

People describe healing differently. Michael Bischoff, imagines healing to be a process, rather than an outcome, a mindset, rather than a conclusion...

God, in Christ, invites us into the healing process, which may very well involve the steps that Moore suggested, (humility, transformation, giving thanks and confession), but it also surely includes more run-of-the-mill, regular, straight-forward activities, as described by the wisdom of healing shared by families not so different than Michael Bischoff's:

A young widow changed careers to become an oncology nurse after losing her husband, a two-time Olympic athlete, to brain cancer at age 35. She said that helping others has helped her heal.

Driving country roads in his Chevy pickup helped heal a young man who suffered what he called “heart attack of the mind.” He said he will always be working toward having depression control less of his life, but getting behind the wheel of his truck again, when doctors didn't think it could happen, has restored him to a kind of wholeness.

A Gulf War veteran, struggling with cancer, taped to a backdrop in his garage a target with the letters “c-a-n-c-e-r” written in ink. Then he takes aim with his Airsoft Machine Gun. As he opens fire, he says, “You ain't got me, man, I got you.” Symbolically attacking cancer has helped him heal.

During treatment for breast cancer, a 24-year-old woman sat at the piano in the church where she works and played her heart out, late at night, with only God as her audience. She said that singing and being able to worship brought her healing and peace.

Can a leper be cleansed? Can there be healing for us?

Lepers are cleansed. Don't wait for healing...seek it out...welcome Christ's touch...accept His Word. Healing is happening right now.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.