SIXTH SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“Engaged”* 2 Kings 5:1-14

 Mark 1:40-45

The two passages that were just read for us have such happy endings for Naaman and the unnamed man in the Gospel of Mark. Both were stricken with one of the many diseases the ancients called leprosy.

As most of us know: in ancient times people were so afflicted were, by Mosaic Law, excluded from family and community life. While there must have been some courageous and compassionate people who brought them food and clothing, such people were probably few.

Also, there were no cures because there was little understanding of the illness and how to treat it. So, most people with leprosy—and several other illnesses—were left very much on their own. The leprosy they carried was thought to be so contagious that those who suffered with it were shunned and considered unfit to be in healthy society.

Additionally, their illness was not only feared, it was also often looked upon as a judgement for some hidden sin. Because of this they were made to live on the very edges of society. They were isolated and alone.

It is one of the curious aspects of Scripture, that when we are told of someone in the Bible having leprosy, the story is *not* accompanied with a description of the person’s loneliness, nor of their life of scraping, begging, and scavenging for enough to keep themselves alive.

It was, of course, common knowledge in those days that people with leprosy were to be shunned, banished from communal life, and from almost all human contact. Actually, that is one of the things that make these two stories so interesting.

One of the things I would like us to notice is that both men appear to have very different experiences of being a leper.

The man in the Gospel of Mark appears to be alone as he approaches Jesus. He engages Jesus all by himself and even though he goes off after his healing in a frenzy of joy and exhilaration he does so alone. You can almost see him dancing his way out the door, stopping everyone he meets to tell them about the wondrous man who just cast out of his body the scourge of leprosy. But he was still alone.

Naaman, on the other hand, was one of the rich and powerful in his community. This, and the fact that he was a pagan, shielded him from the saddest aspects of the deadly and frightening disease. You see, because he was a pagan he was not held to the strict and detailed constraints listed in chapters 13 and 14 of the book of Leviticus. These are the chapters that describe how an Israelite with leprosy is to live and even dress. It proscribes that the ill were to live outside of the community. Leviticus even proscribed the first rules for social distancing. Four cubits, or about six feet—the ill were to stay at least four cubits away from all healthy people, and if they were to come close to healthy people, they were to announce themselves by ringing a small bell, and crying out, “Unclean! Unclean!”

This is *not* Naaman’s life or experience. While the leper who goes to Jesus was alone, Naaman was, by contrast, surrounded by family and retainers. He was even admitted into the presence of no less than *two* kings—his own king and the king of Israel.

As he goes in search of his cure, Naaman is accompanied by his wife, his slaves, his servants, and his assistants. With such an entourage, we can assume that his progress is bold, noisy, even extravagant—which is to say: he was hard to miss. People saw him coming, and I imagine that instead of drawing back in fear and revulsion—as they would for every other leper—the people collected in crowds, curious to see who this important person was.

Naaman also had with him lots of silver, gold, and ten complete sets of clothing. He was looking for a cure and he was prepared to pay “top dollar” for it. This was a trans-actional affair where everybody gets to keep their pride intact.

The best part of both stories is that neither man had to pay for their happy ending. The unnamed man in Mark was cured with the touch of Jesus’ hand. And after some sulking and complaining, Naaman dunks himself in the Jordan River seven times and comes up clean as a whistle.

I wish all stories of illness had such endings. Yet I believe what God wants us to learn from these stories is that even if we are not cured, we can still be healed. I believe God wants us to deeply reflect on what such a distinction can mean for our lives.

In the stories we heard, Naaman and the unnamed leper’s bodies were made whole, but it is what happened to their hearts and spirits that really made the difference—and I believe *that* is the real and ultimate message God wants we to receive.

What God wants us to notice is the way in which each man is *engaged* by God. This is how each man is healed and made complete and whole.

In the gospel lesson, the leper approaches Jesus saying, *‘If you choose, you can make me clean.’* In other words, the man came confessing his need to be in contact with Jesus. He needed to engage Jesus; to connect with him in order to be whole.

As for Naaman, this morning, we did not hear the verses beyond verse 14. If you read a little further you see this once proud, haughty, sulking man is humbled, and even brought to faith.

I wish all of our stories ended like these two. The truth is that most of the stories from our own lives end differently. Our loved ones do not always recover from their illness. Many of us have buried our loved ones—often after long illnesses and much suffering. So, what is the healing message of love God has placed in these stories for us?

By way of a response, what I would like to ask you to do is to revisit one or two of those difficult stories about the loved ones in your life who have died. Most of us have such stories. Many of us have accompanied parents, spouses, siblings, friends…some of us have even attended children through the last stages of their lives here on earth.

One of the things I believe most of us will remember about these experiences is how we drew close to our loved ones, sat beside their beds, stroked their hair, or cheek, or hands, and spoke to them, sang to them. We prayed with them. We prayed for them. We prayed softly, or silently. We prayed with the pastor when he or she came to visit.

We engaged. We did not let go. We did not want to let go. It was a painful time, but it was also a blessed time because we were there. We were present to them, and they to us. Every minute was precious, and we focused all our attention and good will toward our parent, or spouse, or friend, or child. We willed them to receive the love we offered because we wanted them to know they were not alone. We wanted to remind ourselves that we are not alone.

During this past year, the pandemic has made things very difficult. It has often prevented physical closeness. What I hope you will believe is that your loved ones were still *not* alone. I hope you will experience how, through God you *were* able to draw close. Through prayer and spirit, we were able to surround our loved ones with comfort, and with our presence. We did this so the people we loved would know that we were there, that God was there. It was an important gift to offer.

What I want us to notice and hold close is the way in which Jesus did this very same thing when he healed the unnamed man.

When confronted by one of God’s beloved children in need, Jesus ignored all of laws of Leviticus and what they told him to shun the man and turn away, and instead Jesus reached out and engaged him. He touched him and made him whole.

Jesus cured his body, but he also healed the broken heart and suffering spirit, and we know this because in the instant that he was healed, all of the sorrow and misery the unnamed man had felt fell away. In an instant all of that was replaced with wild, giddy rejoicing. Indeed, he was so happy that he was unable (or unwilling) to obey Jesus’ command not to tell anyone how he had been healed. In that moment, the unnamed, former leper became a disciple who proclaimed the love that had touched and healed him.

As for Naaman, in the verses we did not hear this morning, but also the ones we did, Naaman was never alone. The only isolation he experienced was of his own making when he sulked and refused to submerge himself in the Jordan River.

After he did, *that* was when the transformation occurred. That is when he came to know humility and was able to receive God’s grace. That is when he was able to put God in God’s place in his life. Chastened, humbled, and respectful, Naaman is at last made vulnerable enough to admit that he never again wanted to be separated from God.

Engaging with God is hard work. When we are being truthful, we have to admit that we want a cure and a simple path to healing. We do not want to be made vulnerable before God or with God. Yet it is only through engaging with God that we find our healing.

“If you choose,” says the leper.

Our good news is that Jesus did choose. God does choose. Ours is an engaging God whose hand is out toward us even now, willing our hearts, our souls, and our lives to be healed and made whole. And so May all of us reach back and engage. Amen.