

A Sermon by Rev. Richard D. Clewell
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
SERMON: HEALING GRACE
SCRIPTURES: 2 Kings 5: 1-14, Mark 1: 40-45
January 15, 2009

Throughout the years of my ministry as a pastoral care giver I have been privileged to observe a number of healings of both a physical and spiritual nature. Even in my own life experience, God's transforming grace has been present when I least expected it. Whether in an evacuation hospital in Vietnam, a counseling session with a couple in a failing marriage, a patient frightened of death at the end of his struggle to live, or in my own occasions of despair at God's apparent absence, the Lord's gracious presence has brought healing and transformation beyond my expectations or imagination. In most every case those who come to receive divine grace are radically changed in their perspective on self and on God and others.

Today, we engage two such people – one from the Hebrew story tradition and the other from the synoptic gospel of Mark. Their life experiences demonstrate the healing grace of God in a number of remarkable ways. We have already heard the gospel narrative. Let us now attend to the story from 2 Kings 5: 1-14. (O.T. p. 336) [Read]

Naaman is the chief military commander of the Aramean army who has been honored by his king after his victory over Israel at Ramoth-gilead. (1Kings 22: 19-23) As great as his fame is, he suffers from a severe skin disease which carries a social stigma associated with death. Though acclaimed with the status of a great hero, he is desperate and seeks a cure for his condition. Perhaps not by coincidence, a last hope is raised by a young female Israelite captive, a victor's reward, who is a servant to his wife. She relates her trust in the prophet Elisha in Samaria who can cure him of his condition. Upon hearing this report from his wife, Naaman goes to his king who agrees that he should try this option and sends along a letter of introduction to the king of Israel. Naaman prepares by gathering his wealth and pretensions of power and goes hoping to provide reason and recompense for this cure. The intention almost backfires when Israel's king sees this approach as intimidation which could result in further hostile relations.

Now I must admit I appreciate the nuances of this story with the interchanges of its characters. Elisha hears of the king's despair and comes forward to help "in order for Naaman to learn that there is a genuine prophet with divine authority in Israel" (v. 8) The implication here is that God is present in a living way and is available to all people, even others who are chosen outside of

Israel. God's grace and transforming activity reaches out to all with deliverance and salvation. ("victory" in Hebrew)

So Naaman with his impressive entourage comes to Elisha's house expecting a warm reception and perhaps an obsequious response to his fame. But Elisha doesn't even come out to meet him; instead he sends out a messenger telling the general to wash himself seven times in the Jordan River so "your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." Naaman reacts with indignation as perceived expectations are crushed by Elisha's response. Hear his words again in verse 11. "I thought for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure my skin condition." Naaman feels "dissed," his ego is wounded, even his national pride is insulted. What was the piddly Jordan compared to the beautiful rivers of Syria? Though he is desperate enough to heed the suggestion of a captive slave girl and has traveled all the way from Damascus to Samaria, Elisha's instructions sound ridiculous. He expects something dramatic but his transformation comes through the words of the prophet via his messenger. This is the way it seems that God cleanses people of their afflictions; not through the dramatic performance of a human healer, but through the simple act of obedience. Salvation comes mysteriously when we believe God's word and way and not our own. And so Naaman obeys the words of the prophet at the urging of his servants and his flesh is restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he is cleansed. (v. 14) His faith also is new.

Interestingly, Naaman's restoration precedes his confession of faith. (v. 15,16) He now believes whole-heartedly in the God of Israel but still is in the process of understanding divine grace. He wants to repay Elisha with a present which the prophet refuses saying, "As the Lord lives whom I serve I will accept nothing." He keeps the focus on the giver of the gift. And as Naaman returns home with initial faith to struggle with what that means for the rest of his life, Elisha blesses him with peace that's based in his fledgling faith.

In contrast, stands our gospel text relating another occasion of healing grace. This is actually the third instance of healing in the very first chapter of this synoptic which pictures Jesus as the great physician. In this case we observe another desperate man with a horrible skin condition which makes him an outcast in Jewish culture who comes reverently begging Jesus for healing, saying, "if you choose, you can make me clean." He believes in Jesus' authority to heal. Jesus is moved with compassion and also irritation at what institutional religion is excluding this man, reaches out and touches him saying, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately he is made clean. Grace meets the outcast. God wills healing – physical, psychological, and spiritual. This man's simple belief becomes unshakeable faith. Interestingly, Jesus instructs him not to say anything to anyone

but to go show himself to the priest and offer what the Law requires for the cleansing as a testimony to them. But the man's testimony goes far beyond ritual cleansing as he tells everyone what God has done for him which is the response to faithful acceptance of God's grace in action.

In both of these accounts faith is seen as a crumpling of pride and in some sense becoming like children as Christ points out in Mark 10: 15, "truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." We can recognize child-like virtues: vulnerability; an implicit demand for justice; the way children show their treasures, weep in the open, accept grace readily, and are easily amazed. In relating to the Hebrew text, James Howell, a Methodist pastor, observes, "All of Christianity is a kind of return to childhood, training in humility. All of our gestures seem silly: folding our hands, bowing our heads, kneeling. How do you get ahead or defend yourself acting in these ways? We believe in vulnerability, humility and even dipping in a no-account river on the suggestion of a two-bit prophet who wouldn't answer the door. The foolishness of God is wiser than all of us." (*Christian Century*, 2/10/09)

Finally, the grace of God that heals and transforms continues in our journeys in the struggle to be Christ's disciples. Even after being touched by God's grace, we cannot escape moral dilemmas and difficulties, and we continue often to fail miserably. We cannot heal ourselves or even achieve much of what God wants for us. But we remember that it was precisely at those moments of spiraling out of control, of losing all hope and dignity, that a presence we felt and a still small voice whispered, "You are my beloved child – walk with me!" Terry Pluto, sports columnist, in Friday's *Plain Dealer* highlights the faith journey of Karen Wittrock, girls' basketball coach at Lutheran West High School for the past forty-one years who describes God as her rock during her career and life. When battling cancer in 2005, she dreamed and heard a voice saying "Your will be healed" and after treatment she has been cancer free until this day. As she reflected to Pluto, she states, "Every morning you think God must not be done with you yet, that you have another day – now make the most of it."

In these moments we recognize God's unfailing presence and calling in our lives. It is based in the divine gracious initiative to which we respond in some measure of faith and obedience. In this continuing process we can move from my will to your will be done. Thanks be to God for such healing and transforming grace. Amen

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