

A TALE OF TWO HEALINGS

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In our readings today we have two very different healing stories. They are different both because of who is involved and why the healing is recorded in the bible. The one thing that they have in common is that both cases involve leprosy which in biblical times meant any skin disease. A key question that can be asked of any passage is why was this particular story kept. What did it mean to the people of the time and how does this apply to us today.

Our reading from second Kings involves a powerful general and the prophet Elisha who has assumed the mantle of the great Elijah. Early in the Elijah story we see him perform several miracles and now in second Kings we see Elisha performing similar miracles. This is one of several healings that Elisha performs. The key purpose for recording these healings is to show that the power of Elisha equals that of Elijah and that he is God's prophet.

Because this healing is to establish the power of a prophet the person being healed needs to be important. Naaman is a successful general who works for King Aram. Naaman has led successful military campaigns against the nation of Israel. This is indicated because he learns that there is a prophet who can heal him in Israel from one of his wife's serving girls who was captured and taken prisoner in a raid on Israel.

Imagine the terror of the king of Israel (who is not named since the story is to focus on Elisha) when this powerful general arrives and demands to be healed. Of course no general travels without an entourage and we know that he came with quite a treasure trove. So outside the city gates stands a general and an army complete with chariots etc. and the king is terrified.

Enter Elisha who sends word to have Naaman come to him. Elisha does not even go out to meet Naaman, but simply sends a messenger who tells him what to do. Naaman is furious that Elisha does not come out to meet him since Naaman is very full of his own importance. He exclaims, "I expected him to come out and wave his hands over the spot." Naaman's companions convince him to simply do what he is told. Naaman goes and washes and he is healed. So powerful is Elisha's connection with God that he does not have to do anything physical for Naaman and his skin is restored to that of a young boy.

Now contrast this story with Jesus' healing of a man with leprosy. Again the question of why is this story retained. This healing is recorded to tell us several important things about Jesus.

Jesus is probably traveling on the road somewhere in Galilee. We can assume that he is not in a town because in Jesus' time a leper would not have been allowed within the limits of a town. The leper would be considered unclean and anyone coming in contact with him is unclean. Lepers would stand away from the road, be covered head to toe and yell unclean to all who pass by. This leper however approaches Jesus, falls at his feet and acknowledges Jesus' power by saying, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Jesus is moved with pity and touches the man. Immediately (Mark's favorite word in the gospel) he is made clean. He then tells the man to show himself to a priest. This step was required because only a priest could declare the man clean and allow him to return to his home and his community.

We are only at the end of the first chapter of Mark and already we have three healings of the three major illnesses of the day. The first is the demonic possession with the man in the synagogue. Peter's mother in law is healed of a fever, which often was considered caused by evil spirits and finally a leper who by Levitical law is cast out of and cut off from his community. All this happens in just 45 verses. As a set of healings this tells us a great deal about Jesus.

In the case of Jesus healing the leper, we may not have a concept of what is involved in this act. The Rt. Rev. Mark Dyer retired bishop of Bethlehem Pennsylvania and theology professor at Virginia Seminary often told a story about his experience with lepers. Prior to becoming an Episcopal priest Bishop Dyer was a Roman Catholic priest. He spent several years in India teaching theology to the nuns of Mother Theresa's convent.

One day he was walking through the streets with one of the sisters and a leper approached him just like in this story. She knelt in front of him and asked him to lay hands on her and pray for her. Mark looked at the badly disfigured face and then looked at the sister next to him. He said, "What should I do?" The sister smiled and said, "What would Jesus expect you to do." "Pray for her," he answered. The sister simply looked the him and then at the woman.

So he reached down, laid his hands on her head and prayed for her to be healed. He said that he never realized until that moment just how radical Jesus was. Leprosy was a dreaded disease and one that was seen as a curse from God. Remember that Miriam and her husband are struck with leprosy as a punishment from God for trying to supplant Moses' authority. We know now that this is a disease that can be cured, but the poor woman in India had no money for any sort of treatment. Her only hope was in prayer.

Mother Theresa's ministry in India was and continues today to be a ministry to the last and least. She truly embodied Jesus' words, what you do for the least of these you do for me.

Yes, like with the story of Elisha and Naaman, these healing stories all have to do with showing the power that Jesus had to heal, but they also teach us about to whom Jesus ministered. That is the model that we see in the Gospel of Mark. Mark continually places Jesus in the role of savior of those in the most need of his help. This is the model that Sister Theresa also adopted.

The nun in India asked Bishop Dyer the key question. What would Jesus ask or expect you to do?" This is different from the now rather trite WWJD, what would Jesus do. We are not Jesus and cannot do what he did, but we can step back and look at our broken world and ask, what would Jesus expect us to do in a given situation.

Earlier this week there was an article on the website Episcopal Café that is maintained by the Diocese of Washington D.C. The writer was speaking about her Lenten discipline this year. Her plan was to pick one area of concern that touched her heart and spend time during Lent doing something about the issue. She said what we all think, that everything is such a mess, where do we begin. We begin, simply by picking a place and starting.

While working on hurricane relief in Biloxi the volunteers simply picked a place and focused their efforts. While no one group made a huge difference in the overall picture, however each group did make a huge difference to one family. With hundreds of groups working each week, hundreds of families were also helped each week. This is the point. Jesus did not eradicate leprosy, but he touched the lives of many individuals. He then sent his disciples out to do the work he gave them to do. If we then reach out and touch the lives of an individual person or group the effects will ripple out and we can make a difference in the larger picture.

This is why the new emphasis on our outreach programs. We have over a dozen different efforts going on in this parish and each one can use more people. Please consider selecting one of those, or some ministry you feel called to take up and make that your discipline for Lent. The question is which ministry calls you?

By the way that is the theme of our Lenten retreat. The theme is Journeys and Calls. We are in a time of discernment in this parish and Lent is the perfect time for discernment. This is why I ordered the Lenten meditation booklets from Episcopal Relief and Development that are in the narthex and that were mentioned last week. So the individual question is, what is Jesus calling you to do? The corporate question is, what is Jesus calling our parish to do?