

Feb. 15. 2009 6 Epiphany

by Connie Dube, dedicated to Jack & Betsey

2 Kings 5:1-14

Mark 1:40-45

Dear Lord, May we come to you with open hearts and thankfulness for those blessings received. And Lord, we pray that we will come to know your infinite power to restore to health what is hurting in our lives. Amen.

Today we have 2 very different stories of how God works in the world to accomplish personal miracles. By the time I had finished studying these stories, I completely changed what I thought about them.

First we have the story of Naaman - a high ranking commander in the Syrian army, sometime in the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC, and he had contracted leprosy. To have this disease was really bad; it meant you would be a social & physical outcast. At the time, Syria dominated Israel, and on one of the many raids, a young Israelite girl was captured and brought back to be the slave girl of Naaman's wife. She tells her mistress of a prophet from Samaria who can cure such a disease. The wife tells Naaman, Naaman tells the King of Syria, and the King of Syria sends Naaman off with a large retinue & letter to the King of Israel, telling him to go ahead & cure him. The King of Israel naturally, gets totally upset, thinking this is just a ridiculous excuse to start a war again. Of course he can't cure leprosy! You would have to have the powers of a God to cure leprosy! Well, the prophet Elisha gets wind of what's going on, & sends a message to the King of Israel saying essentially, Don't panic, send him along to me, & I'll show him there's a prophet in Israel!

So off Naaman goes to Elisha's place, with his horses & carriages, money, finery, soldiers, pomp & circumstance. Not a bit humble. It seems as though Elisha might have gotten a bit irritated at that, because he doesn't bother to come out, and sends his servant instead with a message. Go and dip yourself 7 times in the Jordan River and you will be made clean. Now it's Naaman's turn to get angry. Here he was

expecting Elisha to come out with great ceremony, invoking Yahweh, waving his hands with probably some impressive intricate ritual, & Elisha's telling him to go bathe in the Jordan River, which Naaman thinks is none too clean, not like the superior rivers back in Damascus.

Well, Naaman's servant steps in & urges him to do as Elisha suggests, saying, if you had been commanded to something fancy & difficult, you would have been impressed & done it. Why not try something easy? So he does, & lo & behold he is restored, & made as good as new.

This is a very convoluted story of a man with a disease that was restored to health by God working through people. Nothing is direct in this story. Restoration comes to Naaman through 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> hand messages. None of the communication is direct. It's the slave girl that tells the wife that tells Naaman who tells the King of Syria, who writes a letter, & Elisha's servant who tells Naaman what to do and Naaman's servant who convinces him to follow the treatment. It's very complicated, and yet God accomplishes this huge turn-around, salvation, of Naaman's life through unlikely, low-caste people, his enemies even. It's not the waters of the Jordan that cure him; it's the far-reaching power of God that works despite the contrariness of human beings.

Contrast this story of healing with the story of Jesus & the leper. It's very different. The restoration of this man is very simple, quick & direct. This is no high ranking commander. He is probably one of the poorest of the poor. The leper approaches Jesus in great humility, on his knees, begging, "if you choose, you can make me clean". This man has the faith that he can be cleansed before coming to Jesus. He knows that healing can happen. There is no show of force or money, no 2<sup>nd</sup> hand messages. No insults fear or anger. The private exchange between Jesus & the nameless leper is simple & no less powerful & life-changing than what happened to Naaman.

I don't know what I believe about physical miracles. Surely there have been unexplained instances of healing. But I do very much believe

in the power of restoration of our inner psyches that stems from the source of all being - God, that Something which is bigger than ourselves. The word “restore” means to bring back something that was lost, to build up again, to make strong. I believe that people can be brought back from the pit of despair, can be built up from being crumbled, can be made strong & find faith once again. No matter what tragedies occur, I know that God loves us, that joy can return, & he would not create us without the ability to connect to Him, and to restore ourselves. That glimmer resides within us. But there is no doubt that it is very hard to tap into it alone. When our lives seem to be chaos and there appears no light in the darkness, I need to know that it is not complicated or difficult to remember that deep within me is that spark of faith that I am NOT alone, & that I cannot rely solely on myself to connect to God.

It may temporarily calm the mind to recite liturgies, dutifully go to church because one should, chant rote prayers, dip oneself in a river, but all the rituals in the world do not have the power to restore. God acts to truly heal us through other people, not objects or rituals. These things may be windows to prayer and helpful, but true help comes from ordinary people, face to face, one at a time, not from the powers that be, not from figures of authority.

I thought initially that the story of Jesus & the leper was a superior story, because it was powerfully direct, simple, intimate, & faith-filled. But now, I see Naaman’s story as a (sadly) ridiculously human one, filled with people that have human flaws and make things much more complicated than they need to be. This story is as true today as back thousands of years ago. And yet, despite the lack of anyone in that story really seeming compassionate, God’s power works through them, they all play their part in Naaman’s healing despite their failings. And I find that very comforting when perhaps my spark of faith is dim.

How much I would like for Jesus to be really here. How easy it would be to fall down on one’s knees and beg for healing. I would believe! It’s not so easy for me to be so sure of God’s grace when we just have each other to look in the eye & say choose, choose to help me! That is why it

is so important for us to connect to one another, and to see the symbolism of gathering in the circle week after week where we face each other, despite our human faults, our infirmities, our bouncing kids, private sorrows, trials, joys & blessings. It is where we can be reminded of the spark of God's restorative power, seen in your neighbor's eyes, and in the connections we make. Joy can come again, in unlikely places, or with unlikely people. God's power is beyond our understanding. Let others help you to find that which was lost, build up that which is crumbled, and make you strong, through the grace & power of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen