

## HEALED WARRIOR FINDS PEACE

A 6EpB Sermon Given by Rev. Dan Stern on February 15, 2009 at BCUCC

When I was a child, old Doc Kinzie, our family doctor, was the most trusted revered person we knew. He was also a member of our church. His wife Geneva taught high school English literature and was a licensed minister in the Church of the Brethren. She sometimes preached in the pulpit; sometimes, Doc did too. In our church, there was no contradiction between modern medicine and belief in God; between women in leadership roles and the Bible; hardly any contradiction between things secular and sacred. Sure, mean people existed, graceless and stupid things happened, untimely and pointless deaths occurred. Then as now, in the church, and in every profession, however much respected, there was also stupidity and gracelessness and all those things that make life sometimes so frustrating. The other doctor in town, Doc Conners was, to quote my dad's blunt manner of speaking, a drunkard. But on occasion, when he needed a doctor, and Doc Kinzie wasn't unavailable, dad would consult with Doc Conners. I asked him once how he could do that, and he said, "Well, Doc Conners is a pretty good doctor even if he is a drunkard." I gradually accepted the fact that even the best of fallible of all can be helpful to us. When I went to Doc Kinzie for some childhood malady, I did so confidently. It wasn't that he was such a superior physician to the drunkard down the road. But he was part of the extended family that was our church community. And we knew that he loved us. We knew that he cared. We expected to get the best he knew how to give us. So: we allowed ourselves to be vulnerable and real in his presence.

Those of us having been blessed enough as children to have been surrounded by grown ups who loved us know that (W. Berry) "our sense of wholeness is not (a) sense of completeness-in-ourselves, but (a) sense of belonging to (one another)." Doc Kinzie's power to heal had to do with his having been our doctor, in a sense, he belonged to us; he could touch, we could trust; because as a whole, we trusted the entire extended family, the very faith community itself of which he was a part.

"The community is the smallest unit of health" (and well-being), says farmer-essayist Wendell Barry. I was fighting off a cold earlier this week, and tried to avoid contact with others. I did what I should have done. God is real but so are germs and I figure, why spread them if I don't have to? We all need to take time to be alone – especially during periods of healing or of grief. Still, over the long haul, none of us can ever be well in isolation from one another. The smallest possible category of wellness is community, not the individual in isolation.

Unfortunately, most doctors we have dealing with nowadays are not people we are in community with. They are not good friends, they are not fellow church goers. They work and generally live at some distance. They are professionals, which meaning they do highly specialized or technical procedures for pay, as opposed to amateurs, that word literally means lovers, one who do the things they do out of love. And though I appreciate the role of professional physicians a great deal, I also feel the need to know, when I'm sick, that I'm loved.

Of course, if sick enough, or if a test concerns us enough, we tend to do what the professionals tell us. We may do, in fact, pretty much anything. Take that pill, submit to that test, smoke that pipe; operate, investigate, get experimental meds at a border town, and even atheists pray the

prayer Ann Lamont says is the most-frequently uttered one, millions say it every day: “Help me, help me, help me”. It’s nothing new. Even way back in Old Testament times, sick and desperate people did what they had to.

Once upon a long-ago Old Testament time, that sick and desperate person’s name was Naaman. Naaman had spent much of his life being the much-feared commander of a very powerful nation’s army. He remained a proud man of great wealth and status. And interestingly enough, somewhere a long life’s journey, this proud man contracted leprosy.

Yep: leprosy. That often incurable, most dreaded of all diseases. The big L – kinda like the dreaded big C seems like for us today. He probably got it sometime late in his career, because having it from the start would have kept him from rising in the ranks. Lepers did not generally become commanders of armies. Lepers were considered unclean, unacceptable to God, unwelcome in the community. To even so much as touch a leper was to yourself become contaminated, unclean.

To complicate matters yet further this big brass fighting man was considered the sworn enemy of God’s chosen people. It was he who had personally led conquering armies into Israel, and had taken slaves back to Syria, including – and how ironic is this – the little Israeli slave girl who first recommended that he seek help from the very people Naaman had previously conquered. Which couldn’t have been an easy thing for him to do, but he was desperate. So swallowing his pride, he sent a letter and fancy presents to the King who Naaman had himself badly-weakened and already-humiliated. Naaman is begging him for help now. Again: irony upon irony.

When he got Naaman’s letter, the poor king of Israel, in agony of anxiety, ripped his clothes into shreds. He thought his powerful enemy was trying to pick another fight. He thought he was being asked to do an impossible favor just to have an excuse to plunder and pillage his people even more. “Am I a god,” said the (unnamed) Israeli King, “To give life and death, that he sends a man to me to cure him of leprosy?”

But it is not the anonymous king, rather, it is the Israeli prophet, who says, in effect, “Let him come. This diseased untouchable shall, with God’s help, be healed; his healing will, in fact, be the first step toward reconciliation among these warring peoples, the beginning of a new era of peace.” I think of this administration’s just-beginning gestures of reconciliation with Iran. Elisha may have been the Old Testament’s Hillary.

Now, Naaman didn’t even know, and wasn’t at all sure he wanted to trust this alleged healer-prophet Hillary – I mean Elisha. Elisha, Naaman would have presumed, could not have loved him in the least. After all, Elisha hailed from the enemy nation Naaman had soundly defeated at war and thoroughly humiliated. But maybe Elisha would at least fear him enough to do what was being asked of him.

So: with a grand display of bravado, Naaman went to the humble abode of Elisha. He pulled up with all his horses and chariots, with abundant offerings of gold and silver. And wanting still to be the proud, prestigious military commander he once was, he waited, upright on his horse, for Elisha to come out to meet him in person. And he waited some more. And started to squirm. He

was beginning to have serious doubts about having come. His resolve wavered yet further when Elisha had the effrontery to send out a messenger boy. It was this boy, this pip-squeak nobody, who actually told Naaman what he needed to do to be healed. It was something almost insultingly ordinary: the boy told him he needed to go take a bath! This conquered nation's elderly soothsayer's little messenger boy was telling the high and mighty conquering war hero to march right down to the muddy insignificant nearby river and take a bath. Man! That really teed off Naaman! If you've ever actually seen the Jordan River, you may get this even more because the Jordan's hardly an impressive body of water. Naaman had marched his way to and through far more impressive streams than the Jordan! So, feeling thoroughly insulted and mad as hell, he almost walked away from his only hope of being healed. The cure seemed way too commonplace, too insultingly simple; it was as if he'd prefer to die proud right than and there than shift his expectations that radically.

Maybe what we're most in need of is a healing of our limited expectations too. If we're so convinced that an ordinary swim in an ordinary river can't heal us, or that mere touch can't make us better, then, of course, it can't. If we all think we can't meet our budget as a church, or stimulate our economy as a nation, then of course, we can't!

Naaman might not have been sure as to how much to hope for. But at the very least, he expected a good show, a faith-healer's song and dance, and all the high tech special effects that could be mustered for someone of his status and wealth! Maybe all he ever dared to expect was theater to distract him from his pain. But he wasn't getting any of it!

As a rule, we don't either. We want magic, we want high-tech gadgets, we want special effects. And sometimes we get them. Sometimes, they do us some good. But what we don't do is adequately (Crafton:) "claim the healings that come to us (in ordinary, everyday ways). We set the evidentiary bar so high for a miracle of healing that a dozen miracles happen to us and we don't notice any of them." We don't want to pay attention to anything that doesn't have a whole lotta pizzazz. Lifeboats keep floating by, and we don't get into any of them. We don't get into the ordinary, everyday miracles. When it comes to things miraculous, we're often just as snobbish as Namaan was.

This reluctance to claim the miracle continues with Jesus' healing of the leper in today's New Testament story. Only this time, the reluctance seems to be on the part of Jesus himself. The leper that Jesus heals wants to spread the word far and wide. One would think that a good thing. But Jesus strictly tells him not to tell of it. (Crafton:) "Jesus wants to draw back from making a big display of his power. Why? Is it that people need to live through weakness (and illness) and even despair before being trusted with the fullness of God's miraculous power? Would (any of us) stick around to hear the whole story of who Jesus is if healing miracles were (too) common (an) occurrence? Mightn't we just pick up our miracle and go home?"

I kinda think Jesus keeps his miracles to a minimum on purpose, reminding us once again, that we are the body of Christ, that we are the dispensers of things miraculous, that we can and must do as he did, that is, touch one another.

“If you choose, you can heal,” says the one who was considered untouchable. And we can say, like Jesus, “I do choose! I will touch! Be made whole!”

And Jesus boldly touched the leper. His act of touching did not hurt or harm – just the opposite, it healed. Touch still does just that. What could be more simple – and more healing – than simple, caring human touch?

I’m not saying that touch isn’t contagious. It is because healing is itself a contagious thing! Healing wants to replicate itself. That’s why the leper who Jesus healed couldn’t help but spread the word far and wide in spite of Jesus’ caution against doing so. People are attracted, eager to be likewise whole and healed, strong and well. Wholeness is as contagious as any disease; we all want to ‘get in touch’ with it!

It’s not a childish kind of naiveté that is required of us in order that we believe in healing miracles. As adults, we come to faith after having been through the fires of life and of leprosy of car crashes and cancer, after having experienced real sadness and disillusionment. It is only after those kinds of experiences that we come to faith in a way that is substantial, in a way that has guts and depth, in a way that gets us past our pain and suffering.

“Go in peace,” Elisha tells the career warrior, the lifelong military man. Just think how thick-skinned that man must have been; here he was, walking away with the soft skin of a little child. Able for the first time in a very, very long time to be amazed and astonished, able to jump up in the air, dance and cry for joy, to lay down the sword and shield used against the ones he is now so indebted to. Go in peace, Naaman, even you. Especially you, who have gone warring so long, inside and out. Having sought, you have found. Having asked, you have been given. Having knocked, the door has been opened, and the love of God is coming in and through your calloused but not impenetrable skin to make you well and whole, to make you anew. Go in peace, Naaman.