

Healed Warrior Finds Peace

Sermon by Rev. Dan Stern, February 12, 2005

When I first came across the little Old Testament story of the prophet Elisha healing the Commander of the Syrian Army, Naaman, it didn't make much of an impression. Miraculous healing stories in the Bible, as well as in popular culture today, are a dime a dozen. I would not be working in the field I am if I did not believe that faith as well as medicine does heal. And it is always and truly a marvelous thing whenever healing happens. Yet so many hopes get shattered and prayers go unanswered. Do we dare believe there can be healing for any and for everyone? And more immediately, do we dare believe healing will come for our own selves and for those we love?

A part of the answer may have to do with what we anticipate. I recently read an article discussing the placebo effect. Sick people get better taking sugar pills. If we expect only worthless commonplace things, than of course taking a sugar pill, or an ordinary bath in an ordinary river can't heal us; a mere kiss or a hug can't make us better! On the other hand, if we expect they CAN, they probably WILL!

We're also better off knowing that healing is something distinct from a quick individual fix. It isn't the sugar pills themselves that do it; it has to do with the GIVING of those pills from someone who cares about us. Healing is interactive. Healing has to do with some kind of loving touch.

Society tends to associate touch with abuse or infection or catching disease. People thought the same way, even more so, in Jesus' day. Proper behavior was all about staying pure, avoiding contamination. But Jesus completely rejected classifications based on degrees of purity. He boldly touched the leper wanting to be healed. And his act of touching did not contaminate - just the opposite, it healed. Touch still does just that. What could be more simple - and more healing - than caring human touch?

I'm not saying that nothing contagious happens when we touch. Healing is *itself* contagious! 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, eagerly drawn 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!

Healing doesn't always happen in obvious and flashy ways though. Wholeness may come to us slowly and subtly over time.

It took me some time to appreciate the subtle simplicity of the faith community in which I was raised. Both my father and my mother were Church of the Brethren PKs - Preacher's Kids. They took the significance of the Christian life as it had been given them pretty much for granted. As a PGK - a preacher's grandkid, I kinda did the same thing. I took it all for granted. But being raised in the faith meant that around the edges of numerous church picnics and potlucks, there were always other adults watching out for me, taking care of me, loving me. Accompanied by the sound of hundreds of hymns beautifully sung in harmony by the whole congregation, I and others got gently steeped over time in an encompassing cloud of grace. It hardly seemed grand or miraculous; and yes, SOMEtimes, out of sheer boredom, excitement had to be sought elsewhere. But just being a part of that quiet, unadorned, hardly-noticeable grace, of a loving church community over the long haul seems, in retrospect, to have been the one most miraculous things of my entire existence.

While I was still a child, miraculous things of a more overt sort were starting to happen in the realms of modern medicine. Like many of their contemporaries, my parents came to believe in science and in medicine about as strongly as they did God and the church. Old Doc Kinzie, our family doctor, was the most revered person we knew. He was also a member of our church. His wife Geneva taught English literature and was a licensed minister in the Church of the Brethren. She often preached in the pulpit; and sometimes, Doc did too. In our church, there was no contradiction between science and belief; between women in leadership roles and the Bible; it seemed a more unified time and place the sense of community far more strong. 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 revered, there was stupidity and gracelessness and all those things that make life sometimes so frustrating. The other doctor in town, Doc Conners was, in my dad's blunt manner of speaking, a drunkard. But on occasion, when he needed a doctor, and Doc Kinzie was unavailable, he'd consult with Doc Conners. I asked him once how he could do that, and dad sad, "Well, he's a pretty good doctor even if he is a drunkard." So I gradually accepted the fact that even the wisest of mentors and healers are fallible, and even the most fallible can heal and be helpful. When I went to Doc Kinzie for some childhood malady, I did so confidently. It wasn't that he was such a superior physician. Nor was he a man of such great moral stature. But since he was part of the extended family that was our church community, we knew that he loved us. We knew that he cared.

Of course, Naaman didn't know the alleged healer-prophet Elisha. Elisha, Naaman would have presumed, could not have loved him in the least. Elisha, after all, hailed from the enemy nation Naaman had defeated at war.

Naaman had been a powerful and successful army commander, the number one big brass of the entire Syrian Army, highly decorated and revered as a war hero. He'd worked himself up in the ranks and UNlike many current warmongering big shots in high places, Naaman HAD been at the front lines of battle. THEN...it turns out that Naaman got leprosy, that most dreaded and incurable of all diseases. He probably got it sometime late in his career, because having it from the start would have prevented him entirely from achieving his powerful position. He would have faced near-total societal rejection - far more so in those days than a person living with AIDS would likely experience today. Lepers did not generally become commanders of armies. Lepers were considered unclean, unacceptable to God, unwelcome in the community. To touch a leper was to yourself become contaminated, unclean, unwelcome. So unless it was a milder kind of skin condition that people eventually mistook for something worse, his warrior fame must have come first, and his sickness, later.

In any case, here's this big brass fighting man, sworn enemy of God's chosen people, sending a letter and fancy presents to the now-weakened, already-humiliated King of the tiny nation Naaman had himself conquered. And Naaman's begging for help to heal his own personal afflictions. And only adding to the irony, it is a little Israeli slave girl, stolen into captivity by Naaman's own army during one of its many raids, who courageously suggests that the leper warrior ask for help from the defeated nation's healer-prophet.

Upon receiving the letter, the poor king of Israel, in an agony of anxiety, rips his clothes into shreds. When confronted with utter grief or despair, that's what you did in those days. You tore up your clothes, you wept, you gnashed your teeth in anguish. He thought his powerful enemy was trying to pick another fight. He thought he was being asked do an impossible favor just to have an excuse to plunder and pillage his people even more. "Am I

a god," said the Israeli King, "To give life and death, that he sends a man to me to cure him of leprosy?"

But Elisha, a great prophet, not a defeated king, says "Let him come. With God's help, this diseased untouchable shall be healed; and that will be the first step toward reconciliation among these warring peoples, the beginning of an era of peace."

So Naaman did go with all his horses and chariots, with his own peace offerings of gold and silver, to the humble abode of Elisha. And wanting still to be the proud, prestigious military commander he once was, he waited for Elisha to come out to meet him in person. But while he waited, Naaman nursed his doubts. And his resolve further wavered when Elisha had the effrontery to send a messenger boy, and it's this boy who tells Naaman to do something almost insultingly ordinary: to take a bath! To just go down to the muddy insignificant nearby river and take a bath. And that REALLY teed off Naaman! If you've ever actually seen the Jordan River, you'd know part of the reason. It's hardly an impressive spectacle. So, feeling insulted and mad as hell, he *almost* walks away from his only hope for healing and wholeness. The cure is too commonplace, too insultingly simple; he'd almost rather remain a proud, rich, and dying leper than shift his expectations that radically.

Wanting to hold onto his own pre-leprosy pride and grandeur, Naaman expected to at least see a good show, to be properly entertained with high tech special effects thrown in! He'd coax the actor-jester out with fine gifts, and this Elisha would be only too glad to perform for such a grand prince as he. Exotic theater to distract him from his pain. Maybe that's ALL Naaman ever dared to expect.

But healing may come anyway, when we DON'T expect it, and have ripple effects far beyond what we imagine. Any individual bodily cure may be only the beginning. The surprise of well-being may envelope even the wider community in ways subtle and simple but no less real and wonderful, the contagion of wholeness, peace and well-being spreading out.

How does a wounded warrior find and spread peace and well-being? In Gods own ways and times. But isn't it interesting that today so many elderly 4-star generals of past wars are among the most articulate spokespeople for opposition to this current war? I think too of WWII era wartime Republican President, Dwight D. Eisenhower, who, upon his 1961 farewell address, warned of the dangers of the military-industrial complex. His speech was probably the most radically antiwar commentary of any president of the US, ever. I think of passionately antiwar veterans I've met, all of whom were wounded, either in body or spirit, in war. Some of their bodily wounds may never be cured. But when a warrior becomes a peacemaker, the contagion of wholeness is spreading.

All the prophet Elisha had to have the little messenger boy say was 'Go take a bath!' Go on, get down in the water, do it seven times. It's that famous biblical number seven which signifies wholeness and well-being. Here it signifies persistence too. 7 times 7 we are to forgive each other like Elisha was doing to his nations sworn enemy. 7 x 7 to ask, to seek, to knock at the house of God like Naaman was doing at the door of the foreign prophet. 7 x 7, until, as was the case even with Naaman, that once-powerful pagan warrior, the healer-prophet at last hits proverbial payday, and a glimmer of faith and trust comes rushing in, and that crumbling, wrinkling, decaying flesh becomes smooth as supple as a baby's again. Healed, whole, starting over like a child!

We too have to keep asking, keep seeking, we have to begin again and again to know simple, everyday miracles. Belonging and being wholly a part of the faith community we call

the church has never been as easy as the taking of sugar pills. The ones who inherit the faith of our ancestors will have to be strong. But we do keep knocking at these very doors because we're tenacious in trusting that its worth it in the end, that beyond all knowledge and worldly experience, there IS healing, there is abundant life, fulfilling life, joy, serenity. It may seem naive to believe in miracles, but it does not have to be a childish kind of naiveté. As adults, we come to faith AFTER having been through the fires of life and of leprosy, AFTER having experienced real pain and suffering 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.

"Go in peace," Elisha tells the career warrior, the lifelong military man. Just think how think-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.