

ANATOMY OF A HEALING
2 Kings 5:1-14, Mark 1:40-45, Psalm 30

Two lepers miraculously healed in today's scripture readings: one a famous general and the other an unnamed villager from Galilee. What does a healing miracle look like? Is there a pattern? If we examine these two very powerful biblical stories they give us an anatomy of a healing.

The first element in a miracle of healing is dis-ease. Something's seriously wrong. Naaman was a proud and successful general. He had won many battles. Nothing could touch him or hurt him. But into this proud, powerful man's life crept a tiny spot, a single lesion. He didn't let it bother him, but soon, a second spot and then other spots in different places. Naaman had leprosy. And all his army, all his weapons, his wealth, the prestige of his King – none of them could help.

The unnamed leper in the Gospel account was forced by his leprosy to live as an outcast. He wasn't allowed to work. He had to live outside any town and keep himself 150 feet away from any well person, wear torn clothes and cover the top of his lip crying "*unclean, unclean,*" to warn anyone away from coming in close contact with him.

We certainly know when we're sick or if there is something obviously wrong with us. But there are plenty of things that cause dis-ease in our lives that we can block out or ignore. Bad habits, not taking care of our bodies or our souls, living in a way that's harmful to ourselves and/or others. Anything that separates us (that puts distance) between us and God, between us and our essential true self, or that separates us from others, is a kind of mortal illness. The theological term for it is *Sin*. Before we can begin to be healed from it we have to recognize that we're ill.

The second key element in a healing story is *hope*. The Hebrew slave girl brought Naaman hope. "*If only my Lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.*" The girl's testimony gave the general hope for a cure. The unnamed leper in the gospel story must have heard about Jesus' power to heal. "*If only I can get him to recognize me, he could heal me,*" thought the leper. We too must have a glimmer of hope, to see the possibility of God making us well, if we hope to be healed.

Next the person desiring to be healed tells his or her story. The King wrote a petition for Naaman with the request to the King of Israel to heal him of his leprosy. The leper knelt at Jesus' feet and begged, "*If you choose, you can make me clean.*" In every Gospel account of healing it is either self-evident or the person makes it clear what they want to be healed from. Jesus didn't take it for granted, but asked. Blind Bartimaeus called loudly after Jesus and his entourage passing him in the streets of Jericho – "*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.*" (Mk. 10:46ff), Jesus called for Bartimaeus and then asked him, "*What do you want me to do for you?*" "*My teacher, let me see again,*" Bartimaeus instantly responded.

That's something missing from our sacramental prayers for healing. And frankly it's always bothered me. I believe that our prayers are much more effective when we are

clear what we are praying for. So, I would like to invite you, if you come to the Lady Chapel for healing prayers at the end of the service, let the person praying for you know what you are praying for – whether it is a prayer for yourself (e.g. *I'm praying to get over this cold, or for strength to recover from my upcoming surgery*) or for someone else (e.g. *I'm interceding for my Aunt Carol who was diagnosed with breast cancer*). You may have to be loud to be heard over the organ postlude, but that's all right. An important step in healing is being clear what we are asking God to do for us.

The fourth element in the anatomy of a healing is the process by which the person is healed. Naaman was told by the prophet's messenger, go and wash himself 7 times in the Jordan River. This was clearly not what Naaman expected. He was incensed. He expected a big production, the prophet himself waving his hands and doing impressive looking magic. Heck, he didn't even see the prophet, just his secretary. Naaman was enraged. Had it not been for the wise counsel of his servants he never would have been healed. So the proud general **humbled** himself by washing 7 times in the Jordan River. And he was healed.

The leper in the gospel story was healed when Jesus accepted his challenge, "*if you choose you can make me clean.*" "*I do choose,*" Jesus said after being deeply moved. Jesus put his hands on the leper and said "*Be made clean.*" Leprosy was like a contagion. Contact with a leper not only put someone at risk of catching the disease; it also made the person who touched the leper ritually unclean. The leper had already broken the law by kneeling in front of Jesus instead of staying 150 feet away. By touching the man Jesus should have become unclean himself, but instead something very remarkable happened. The leper was cleansed. Healing flowed from Jesus instead of ritual impurity spreading from the leper. Healing, cleansing and new life flows from Jesus' touch. Just as Jesus was not afraid to touch the one who most represented contagion and impurity, God the Creator was not afraid to touch his creation, choosing to be born in to the world he had made. Human touch and healing are inseparable.

The laying on of hands and anointing with oil with prayers for healing is a vitally important part of St. John's ministry. Jesus modeled this kind of prayer for his disciples who continued to pray for those who were sick. Laying on of hands and anointing with oil were already an established tradition in the early church and clearly referenced in several N.T. letters. *Unction* is the name of this sacrament. Clergy are clearly called to this sacramental ministry and Julia and I, just as our predecessors at St. John's, believe deeply in the efficacy of this type of prayer.

But I'd like to extend it. I think of prayers for healing as a sacrament of the whole Church. I would love it if others would join me in the laying on of hands. I would love to see us develop a healing team of lay people who share this ministry along with the clergy. I would love to have the person next to you, and others present in the chapel join in the laying on of hands and prayers. It is very powerful when a number of people join together in prayer.

When Mother Julia was ordained to the priesthood two weeks ago all that was required in the rite was the bishop to lay hands on her and pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit to make her a priest in God's Church. How much more powerful it was when all the priests present represented the whole priesthood in that prayer for the Holy Spirit. How much more powerful it is when several people join in the laying on of hands and prayer for healing.

God's power to heal is the fifth and most essential element in a story of healing. We see the dramatic healing of Naaman and the unnamed leper at Jesus' hands. How about us? Does Jesus still heal today? Oh yes, I can attest to that. I've seen God's hand at work in many people's healing. I've seen people move from active addiction to recovery. I've seen people forgive and relationships be healed. I've seen people recover from depression and other forms of mental illness. I've seen people healed from cancer, from severe trauma, from stroke, from heart disease, from infectious disease and more. I have only rarely witnessed such an obviously miraculous and dramatic healing as the two healing stories today, but I've seen God's hand at work nonetheless. God is present in faith, in balance, in power, in change, in God's Holy Spirit working in cooperation with medicine and the natural process of healing.

In my own life, I heard God promise me 25 years ago when I went up the altar rail for prayers for healing that I would be healed from GERD (gastro esophageal reflux disease). It took a long time of suffering with the condition and managing it. But when a laparoscopic or micro surgery procedure became widely available an operation healed me completely. Was God at work in a medical surgical procedure? I certainly believe so. Healing takes many forms, and I trust God to be real and miraculously present in all of them.

The last stage in the anatomy of a healing is gratitude. As the story continues in 2 Kings Naaman scoops up two mule loads of Israeli soil so he can continue to worship the God of Israel on God's own soil in his own country. The unnamed leper in Mark's story couldn't contain himself, but broadcast the story, so much so that Jesus got mobbed with people everywhere he went. The Psalmist in today's psalm proclaims:

"You have turned my wailing into dancing; you have put off my sack-cloth and clothed me with joy. Therefore my heart sings to you without ceasing; O Lord my God I will give you thanks for ever."

So too God gladly receives our thanks and praise for all the wonderful ways he has touched us and cleansed, set us free and made us well.

Six parts of an anatomy of a healing story: (1) Recognition that we are ill, (2) hope, (3) saying out loud what it is we need, (4) a process such as the laying on of hands and anointing, (5) God's miraculous power and action to heal – whether that action be immediate or in God's own time, and (6) gratitude for the great gifts God has given us. That is the anatomy of a healing story. And by God's grace it can be the anatomy of our healing stories as well.