

2 Kings 5:1-14

¹Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy ²Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." ⁴So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. ⁵And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. ⁶He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." ⁷When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." ⁸But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." ⁹So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. ¹⁰Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." ¹¹But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! ¹²Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. ¹³But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" ¹⁴So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Psalm 30 (UMH 762)

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

²⁴Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. ²⁵Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. ²⁶So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; ²⁷but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

Mark 1:40-45

⁴⁰A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." ⁴¹Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" ⁴²Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. ⁴³After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, ⁴⁴saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded,

as a testimony to them.”⁴⁵ But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible with Apocrypha

The Good News

The Scripture readings this morning from the book of Second Kings and from the Gospel According to Mark have some similarities, because they both tell stories about disease and healing. In the reading from Kings, Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Aram was plagued with leprosy. Naaman visited the prophet Elisha in Samaria who told him to wash himself in the river Jordan and he would be healed. Naaman did as he was told and he was healed.

Then in Mark we heard about Jesus encountering a leper who wants Jesus to heal him. Mark says in verse forty one ⁴¹*Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!”* And then in verse forty two we hear ⁴²*Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.*

Faced with two scripture readings with such similar themes and ideas, a good preacher would be tempted to take the hint and to preach on the subject of disease and healing. As I looked through several sermons I found on the Internet last week, that is just what some very good preachers have done.

I imagine that around the world this morning, dozens or maybe hundreds of preachers are delivering sermons about disease and healing based on these two scripture passages. And in trying to bring the stories from the past to the present, and make them relevant to the world today, some of those preachers may be preaching about the AIDS epidemic rather than leprosy, or if they are really up on current events, they may be making references to an avian flu pandemic.

Other preachers are probably preaching about the lepers depicted in these passages rather than the disease itself. They may be comparing them to the outcast persons of our society today. And depending on what identity group the preachers have a special affinity for, those outcasts of society may be women, or racial minorities, or gay people, or Buick owners, or . . . Well, you get the idea.

I, on the other hand, am going to go in an entirely different direction. Because I’m going to concentrate on another concept from Mark’s scripture reading. And you can decide for yourself what kind of preacher that makes me.

You already heard me read the verses from Mark where Jesus heals the leper. The passage continues: ⁴³*After sternly warning him he sent him away at once,* ⁴⁴*saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."* ⁴⁵*But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.*

Some translations of this passage say that instead of Jesus having pity on the leper, that Jesus was angry, and many Biblical scholars suggest that this is the more correct translation. So why would Jesus be angry? Was he angry with the leper? Probably not - after all Jesus healed the man and sent him to the priest to be examined and declared free from disease. Why did Jesus give the man a stern warning to say nothing to anyone?

Well, maybe Jesus was angry because he knew what was going to happen. He could see where this encounter was going to lead. And where did it lead? The man did not do as Jesus had told him, but rather he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word. Can you blame the man? After all, one minute he has leprosy and the next minute he doesn't. One minute he has to stay 50 paces away from healthy people and shout "Unclean", and the next minute the leprosy is only a fading memory. Who wouldn't spread that kind of news around? If it were me, I would be telling to everyone I knew about how my life had been changed and who was responsible for it.

And that was what Jesus was angry about. The passage from Mark ends with this: *Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.* In other words, when the people found out that Jesus was healing people, he was mobbed with people wanting to be healed. Every Harry Hardship and Sally Sob-Story for miles around was looking for Jesus and looking for a cure.

Rev. Ken Klaus, Speaker of The Lutheran Hour radio show, puts it this way:

The word got around that Jesus was doing miracles and people came. The lame, the blind, the crippled, the possessed. It was an unusual parade. They hopped, hobbled, limped, groped, were led and carried. Like a tidal wave the sick arrived. The whole curious town came as well. Jesus healed many of them. How many I don't know. But He healed enough of them that the news about His miracle working spread even further. And when those people heard the news, they went to see for themselves. Did they go to see Jesus the Savior from sin? Did they go to see Jesus the giver of eternal life? Nope, they went to see a doctor who wouldn't charge you; a doctor who didn't ask you to fill out insurance forms; a doctor who didn't make you sit for hours in the waiting room. Having heard about Jesus, they wrapped up their sick, put them on stretchers and headed out to

see the doctor.

Why did that make Jesus angry? After all, all these people were suffering. Did Jesus lack compassion for them? I don't think so. I think Jesus was angry because he wanted to spread the Good News, and being mobbed by people looking for healing was preventing him from doing that. Those people weren't seeking out Jesus to hear the Good News, but to be cured.

We get a clue about that when we read verse thirty eight, just before this week's passage begins. In verse thirty eight Jesus says: *"Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do"*. Jesus knew that he only had so long on earth, only so much time to proclaim the message, only so much time to tell the Good News.

How does this idea fit into our lives today? As a church, as Christians, we need to remember that we are here to spread the message. Oftentimes, as Christians we get so involved in doing good things that we forget that there is more to it than that. Especially in the United Methodist Church - where so much of what we do is social ministry. John Wesley founded Methodism on the idea of social ministry - reaching out to people in need and helping them. And that idea is carried down to us today. Being a Methodist means helping others - social ministry R Us.

But sometimes it is easy to forget that there is more. After all, the Lions Club up the street is also about helping others, and they do a good job of it. But they aren't about proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ; that is what we are about.

A preacher started his children's sermon by telling the children, *"I will say a word, and I want you to respond by saying the first word that comes to your mind. Are you ready?"* The kids said *"Yes, we're ready."* The preacher said, *"Frog!"* A little boy shouted, *"JESUS!"* That totally confused the preacher. He said, *"Johnny, why did you say Jesus when I said frog?"* Johnny said, *"Because I knew that you didn't call us up here to talk about frogs."*

Johnny, in his youthful wisdom, has the right idea. He knew that we didn't come here to talk about frogs, but to talk about Jesus. The same way that Jesus didn't come to earth just to heal people, but to proclaim the good news.

Rev. Ken Klaus explains:

You see, Jesus had been born to be the Savior of souls, not just the healer of bodies. Jesus' miracles had been designed to show He was God's Son doing God's work of buying

us back from those who had stolen us away from our heavenly Father. Jesus' physical miracles were designed to point people to a greater, a spiritual miracle: the blood-bought forgiveness which His death would offer to all who believe. But Capernaum missed the point. They saw Jesus only as a healer. Now, don't get me wrong. Jesus is a healer. He has healed a great many people of physical, mental, and spiritual ailments. But Jesus is not just, only, and merely a heaven-sent healer.

Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. If, this day you see Him only as a healer; only as a teacher; only as a preacher; only as a philosopher; only as a good man, a wise man, then you have a poor picture of who He was. Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. Jesus Christ is your Savior. That is the picture Scripture would have you see. That is the picture that the Spirit wishes to show you. Jesus Christ is your Savior. That is why He was born. That is why He lived. It is why He suffered, died, and rose. And that is the picture of Him that the Holy Spirit wants to share with the world.

We need to be doing a thousand things -- all the way from feeding the hungry to keeping the church building cleaned. But we must not let those things -- all of which are important -- distract us from our primary task -- which is the same task that Jesus was focused on in our Gospel reading-- proclaiming the message (Mark 1:38) -- preaching the Gospel -- going into all the world to make disciples and to baptize and to teach (Matt. 28:19-20).

That mission needs to underlie everything that we do as a church. We proclaim the Good News about Jesus in our preaching, but we also proclaim it when we sing hymns -- and come for baptism -- and share the Lord's Supper. We proclaim the Good News of Jesus when we teach our children the great stories of the Bible that point toward Jesus. We proclaim the Good News of Jesus when we invite our neighbor to church. We proclaim the Good News of Jesus when we gather together in Jesus' name for a church dinner. We proclaim the Good News of Jesus when we help the needy in Christ's name.

But we must be careful -- careful not to get so caught up in those thousand tasks that we forget our primary task -- proclaiming the Good News. Jesus was concerned about being distracted from his task of proclamation by the crowds. We must be careful when doing good works not to forget to lift up Christ's name.

As we go about our many tasks, let us always stay focused on our primary task -- lifting up the name of Jesus -- going -- making disciples for Jesus -- baptizing -- and teaching about Jesus. As Christians and as a church, that is the most important work that we do.