

The hard part
Menno Mennonite Church
October 13, 2019

Purpose: To explore our inclinations of discomfort when we are shown grace.

Message: God meets us in the opportunities of life offering grace and healing more in the simple than the demands we take on ourselves.

Scriptures: Mark 1:40-45 (please read); 2 Kings 5:-14 (I will read)

Synopsis: Most of the time we turn to God for magic. We spend time praying for exactly what we want for those who we love. Sometimes this connects us to what we are hoping for. Sometimes it does not. That leaves us with a hard question: what does it mean when what we expect from God fails to materialize. We expect that God works in magical ways—we get the right formula, pray the right prayers, be the right people and things happen for us accordingly, presto, change. Yet more often than not, this is not how it works. Rather God, Jesus defers the healing the big stuff of life and invites people into the mystery of life where God promises gracious presence far more than specific provision. How do we live life within the mystery of God's way of being as much as we do the magic of God's working?

5 Naaman, 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.

² Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife.

³ She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

⁴ So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said.

⁵ And 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.

⁶ He 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."

⁷ When 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."

⁸ But 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."

⁹ So Naaman came with his horses and chariots,
and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house.

¹⁰ Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying,
"Go, wash in the Jordan seven times,
and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean."

¹¹ But 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!

¹² Are 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.

¹³ But 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'?"

¹⁴ So 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.

Mark 1:40–45 (NRSV)

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.”

⁴⁵But 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.

Everyone loves a good healing. There is something about it that speaks to us still, even if this might not be our everyday fair. Because who doesn't want to experience that? Nearly everyone we know, including ourselves, are in need of healing in one way or another or from one time or another. It is the human condition. We want to be healed. From physical maladies or mental illness. Within the crippling confines of grief. The memories that have a way of haunting. We know where healing comes from. We know where to look. We look to the God who is above us all and seek wholeness. But mostly we don't get to pick the method. Seldom do we get to steer the outcome of our prayers or see the miraculous in our midst. We long for it, we desire it, we hope for it. Yet most often, we are left wondering how to explain what really can't—when things don't always go the way we hoped. Even when we do see healing and the seemingly miraculous, we are much more given to point to the circumstances and facilities that made it possible then to point back to the prime actor behind the scenes—the God of the Universe.

But we know there are miracles out there. We hear the stories. We know the precedent. The scripture is full of them. I must admit that I don't go there all too often for not quite knowing what to say with them, but that is why the lectionary can be helpful from time to time. The text from Mark we read this morning has Jesus so overwhelmed by the demand for the miraculous that he needs to leave town to find a moment's peace, pleading with those he heals, to please for the love of all that is holy to keep it quiet. But even then they are out there pestering him; no one can actually keep it quiet.

In our sermon text, we have Elisha offering a cure for Naaman who was seeking wholeness. There is a whole lot of power and politics going on here, but at the heart of it all we are given a story where the person in power sets out to tackle the problem they had in the way they knew best; by exercising their power, privilege and wealth to get their way. Sickness, with few exceptions, is an equal opportunity tormentor. We tackle our health in a very similar way to how we tackle most problem—with as much gusto and power as our position and our pocketbook will allow. When it is our turn, we go to the best hospitals, the best methods and the best doctors to make things right. I will confess that I am about as skeptical as the next North American guy when it comes to faith healing, expect to say that I do believe it exists, despite not being my gifting. But it is hard for me to forget the healing I witnessed the couple of times I spent time with the church in Colombia. People offered and received healing of all sorts freely,

and fully. When people don't have the resources, perhaps their way is a bit clearer toward true healing and the real work of faith than we who are burdened with greater worldly options. No matter where you come from on this side of the gospels, though, it is hard to read these stories without noting on some level their rarity in daily life. It can be hard to read of the miracles of the bible that come so seemingly easily and not feel like you are just being offered that which you just can't have.

"The problem with miracles," Theologian Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "is that it is hard to witness them without wanting one of your own. Every one of us knows someone who is suffering. Every one of us knows someone who could use a miracle, but miracles are hard to come by."

So we theorize, theologize, and spiritualize: "God is using this sickness to build your character." "God's preparing you for something great." "God is testing you, or Satan is testing you — stay strong!" "You need to have more faith." "Maybe there's some secret sin in your life — have you tried confession?" In her excellent and achingly witty book *Everything happens for a Reason* Author and theologian Kate Bowler reflects on these responses in her own illness wondering what might be wrong with the simple, honest statement when the news is the worst: Wow; that's tough. I am so sorry. And allowing that to suffice from there.

Besides being insensitive and hurtful, these claims and admonitions encourage us to assume that health, wholeness, and comfort are the norms we should expect to experience in this life. Everything else by this accounting — all the pain of life — is an aberration easily controlled as a function of faithfulness. No wonder people flock to churches that promise prosperity, healing, and happiness Sunday after Sunday — why not grab hold of the magic if it's out there to claim? Why not demand glitter and spectacle?¹ We want the magic of Jesus where the right words, the right symbols, the right sayings make everything come right in the end. Instead we get the mystery of Jesus who goes around healing people and telling them to keep their mouth shut about it, lest the secret spread. We are a lot like Naaman; we come convinced that there is the right thing to do, the right thing to say, and the right person to say the right words, and God will act on our behalf. Yet we have Jesus blatantly hiding what he can do. Elisha doesn't even deal directly with Naaman to set him right—he just sends an aid and calls it good

¹ ii Drawn from Debie Thomas *Mystery, Not Magic*
<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1640-mystery-not-magic> 10-8-2019

enough. We may want the magic ones of the bible, but rarely do they arrive in the self-promoting guise we often look for them in. How we ache for the big flashy motion and flash of the magical, forgetting that when it comes to magic that the bigger the flash, the more behind the scenes action is trying to be hid.

I think we have a lot more in common with Naaman in this story than anyone else. Naaman was no one to be messed with. A general in a regional superpower, he came with the backing of his king, his position, his expectations. It is profoundly bad news when he shows up looking for help from where he expects it—the King who has no better answers than anyone else. When Elisha offers to take the case, Naaman comes with all his power intact—his horses, his chariots, all his people, his wealth (the sums being many years wages for most workers). He is still operating within the world of power, and he expects a response within that same realm. He cannot imagine anything outside of that world. Doctors are supposed to call in prescriptions or perform surgery to make us better. Prophets are supposed to say some prayers or wave their hands to heal sick people. When Elisha does none of that, Naamaan is furious. He assumes the prophet is just trying to make him look silly. Go was in the muddy, good for nothing Jordan—there is no way. It takes Naaman’s servants to put it all in context for him. Listen, Boss-- perhaps we are making this just a little too hard. Perhaps we are bringing the wrong expectations to the work of healing here. Perhaps there is something else going on in our midst.

The purpose of the scriptures, I think, is not so much to spell out the ways and means of the world as it is, prescribing the way to procure the magic of God in our daily lives. There is too much going on for that, too many layers, too much nuance. Have you ever wondered about all the folks Jesus didn’t heal, that Elisha failed to see? Sometimes I wish that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John had included a few less dramatic stories in their books, too. I wonder, did Jesus ever visit a sick house only to offer some comfort, a listening ear, and some chicken soup in a yogurt container? Did he ever tell a chronically ill child, “I can’t take away your pain, but I love you, and I’ll try my best to help you bear it?” Did he ever encounter an unclean spirit he didn’t or couldn’t cast out? Did Jesus ever say no? We don’t have those stories. We do have these stories of healing because it would be much truer to our experience. It would be consistent with the world as we know it. Yet, we have the miracles, and I think that they are stories we need precisely because they are so far beyond our normal way of experiencing the world. They invite us to imagine a different world that might be possible. They help us with the difficult work of

expanding our horizons beyond what is normal—a world of suffering—to a world where God’s working is on full display for all to see. To be clear, God is at work in our midst. Perhaps by illustrating the large strokes of the God story with power and might, they encourage us to look for the finer brush work in our own lives. Perhaps the point here is less the magic of big deeds and big words and more the mystery of God with us even where we least expect, even where we are not expecting to see God at work, like the muddy waters of a sometimes river, like the wildernesses of our lives. Like the places where we wonder where God may have forgotten us. Like the aching places that never quite go away. Like those situations where no matter what our power and our ability, we don’t get to heal at all. By all means we need the miracles; but we should not be so blinded by the extraordinary to forget that God with us remains present in the mysterious ways of life.

The challenge here is to imagine a world where God with us is not reduced to the all or nothing, go big or go home images we have of the world. We have the miracles in the world to speak to the moments where we seek God’s presence. We need to know that God works. Yet, we are invited into the ways that God acts, miraculous or not. We are invited into the mystery of a kingdom of heaven already here, yet seemingly so far away. These stories invite us into this both-and, trusting God in our midst in all things. Sometimes the hardest phrase that we have to pray is the most basic: if it be your will, because it forces us to contemplate the possibility of a healing that is not on our terms, our schedule, or in our way of knowing wholeness. And that is scary, yet that is the essence of faith—to allow God to be God and open ourselves to God’s surprises.

May we be given the strength to do the hardest thing of all—looking for God at work, in the midst of the miracles of every shape, size, and color, calling them out for all to see to the Glory of God. Amen.