

2 Kings 5:1-14

1 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

It's That Simple

A sermon preached by
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Texts:

2 Kings 5:1-14
Mark 1:40-45

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to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

15 Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant."

Mark 1:40-45

40 A leper came to [Jesus] begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." 41 Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" 42 Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. 43 After sternly warning him [Jesus] 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.



I once lived in a community where there was a little boy who refused to look both ways before crossing the street. Joel was so distracted and preoccupied with whatever he was playing that he would dart out from between the parked cars to get over to the playground. We all knew this about Joel so we were all careful as we drove past his home.

Everyone would tell him, "Joel, you can't do that. You're going to get hit by a car. You have to stop, look both ways, and listen for cars." Neighbors would tell him, his parents would tell him, his big sisters would tell him, but Joel had a difficult time getting the message. "Stop, look, listen."

Fortunately, we lived on a street without much traffic so Joel was never struck by a car. Joel moved away with his family a few years later and I often wonder if he ever got the message. Stop, look, listen.

It's really quite simple, isn't it? Stop, look, listen. Do that and you probably will avoid getting run over by a car. It's that simple. In today's lesson from 2 Kings, we read a masterpiece among the stories of the prophet Elisha that has a message that's also just that simple.

At this point in the history of Israel, we find that Aram, the nation geographically to the northeast of Israel which we might know better as Syria, has the upper hand. The Arameans (or the Syrians) had been making warring raids on Israel and on one of these forays into enemy territory the army had captured a young girl who became a slave for the wife of Naaman, great general of the Syrian army.

Naaman had a skin disease of some kind that caused him to be known as a leper. This little Jewish maid servant of Naaman's wife told her mistress that Naaman should go to Samaria in the middle of Israel where he would be healed by Elisha, a prophet of the Israelite God.

The king of Israel heard that Naaman was coming to his country and he was naturally upset. The great commander of his conqueror's army is making a pilgrimage into Israelite territory. Of course he would be concerned. He thinks that this is a test and that the Syrians are going to break a tenuous peace which currently exists between the two nations. "What am I going to do? I'm not God, I can't cure this guy!"

Elisha the prophet answers the king's concerns. "What's the problem? God can cure this man. Send him to me when he arrives."

So Naaman the Syrian general ends up in front of Elisha the Prophet's house and Elisha doesn't even come out to greet him. What a gutsy thing to do. The commander of the army of Syria, the most powerful man in all of Syria (except for perhaps the king himself), the king's right hand man, the ruler of the military occupiers of Elisha's country shows up at his door and he doesn't come out to meet him. He sent a message to Naaman. "Go and wash in the Jordan [River] seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean."

"That's it?," Naaman must have been furious, "That's it?!?! I ask him to cure me of this horrible disease and he sends a message that I should go and wash in one of the muddiest rivers in the world? I could have stayed home and washed in the greatest of the world's rivers – the Abána and Pharpar in Damascus. He wants me to wade into a mud puddle!"

He turned his back in a huff and left in a rage totally ignoring the obvious. He expected a show. He wanted the prophet to come out and wave his hand over him and call on this great God of Israel to come down and bring about the cure of his leprosy. He wanted the prophet to give him some ritual to perform which would symbolize the greatness of the man and the washing away of his disease. That's not what he got, so he was outraged.

Naaman's advisors convinced him to do it. They told him, "If this prophet had told you to do something outrageous, you would have done it without question. But now that he gives you some simple instructions he's worthless? It's easy. Just give it a try."

Naaman waded into the River Jordan, washed himself the seven times that Elisha told him, and he was cured of his leprosy. The Syrian generals now turns his back on his own gods, returns to Elisha and admits that YHWH, the God of Israel, is above all gods.

The servants of Naaman are the heroes in this story. They convinced Naaman to try this simple command. If Elisha says it will work, maybe it will. Who knows? What have you got to

lose? And if this YHWH is so great, you'll be cured. Everything doesn't have to be so complicated, you know. Stop, look, listen before you run off in a rage. Stop, look, listen to what's been asked of you. Stop, look, listen. It's really that simple.

It was good for Naaman that he decided to follow the simple advice of this prophet of the Israelite God. He paid attention once his servants calmed him down. Naaman realized that perhaps *it is just that simple*. And he was cured.

One day traveling through Galilee Jesus encountered a man with leprosy who knelt at his feet and asked to be made clean. Now of course this man probably knew what he had to do to become clean. He knew the law – that he had to present himself before the priest and follow the prescribed ritual once he could show that the disease was no longer apparent. But he wasn't willing to wait for the physical symptoms to go away. He certainly knew that Jesus was not a priest, that Jesus had no authority for ritual cleansing and for determining whether or not this man was clean. Jesus had no power to proclaim that this man could legally return to the accepted interactions within the society in which he lived. Yet he asked Jesus, not the priest, to make him clean.

The disease of leprosy as we find it referred to in our Bible was not necessarily that which we know today as "leprosy" or Hansen's Disease. The leprosy of the Bible was any one of a number of skin disorders which people feared were communicable. If you had any condition which resembled what was considered to be unclean, you were separated out from society until something could be done to make you clean once again. Leviticus 13-14 makes it quite clear that a person with leprosy has no place in normal society. Read these chapters sometime. You'll learn about skin boils and eruptions, what to do if they turn green or reddish, and what happens if white hair grows on skin abnormalities. You'll learn how the priest diagnoses leprosy and that a house or a person's clothing can be diagnosed with leprosy as well.

Here is what it says about the person who the priest diagnoses:

The person who has the leprosy disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp. (Leviticus 13:45-46)

It is one more of the ways that we humans have decided to shun other human beings. The determination of leprosy is another way that we separate out those who we think are defective, different from us. If they wear special clothes, leave their hair a mess, shout "unclean" as they approach us, we'll know not to touch them. If we do touch them, then we're unclean as well.

It almost seems like a child's game sometimes. Like catching cooties from girls – only *girls* have cooties, you know. But in that game, you might be lucky enough to have that invisible spray that will protect you before or after being touched. In 1st century Galilee, no one had the invisible spray. If you touched someone with cooties, you got cooties, and you got pushed to the margins of the world so no one had to see you or touch you again.

But Jesus has a different interpretation of this leprosy dilemma. Jesus knew that God has created us to interact closely with each other, that the only reason we get separated and segregated is because of the rules and boundaries *we* have created in this world. He knew that nothing would change in him if he touched this untouchable man. And I think he knew that touch is truly what this man was asking for – touch that will reconnect

him with the world around him – touch that every human being must have or he or she shrivels up to nothing.

We treat each other like lepers, we shun each other, we segregate each other. And it hurts.

men who watch in the
night see me coming and yell
the leper comes the
leper comes who will feed her
she without friend or lover.

— Sonia Sanchez

It's that simple. It's about contact with other people. It's about loneliness – about not being fed, being without friend or lover. It's that simple says Jesus. It's about touch.

Naaman's cure came from washing in the Jordan. Elisha wouldn't take the risk and physically touch him. He let God touch him through the waters of the muddy river. That was a simple solution that Naaman finally agreed to. Here Jesus' solution is even more simple.

Jesus came to teach something very different than what the prophets before him had been teaching. Mark's Gospel opens with Jesus proclaiming this new prophetic message very clearly: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

It's a new message. It's different than the prophets. Elisha didn't touch Naaman; Jesus says it's time to move beyond our fear and touch, time to *truly* realize God's presence, God's realm. The realm of God is everywhere – it's available to everyone – we can reach out and touch it. The realm of God is what connects us to each other. The realm of God is what connects us to community.

Touch the man and he is clean. What Jesus' action effectively says is, "Touch the man – the world says that by doing so I am now, we are both now, unclean – *I* say that by touch we are both now *clean*."

Nearly 60 years ago, Mother Teresa found a woman "half eaten by maggots and rats" lying in front of a Calcutta hospital. She sat with the woman until she died. Soon after, she began her campaign for a shelter for people to die with dignity. Until her death in 1997 she made a mission of caring for the human castoffs the world wanted to forget. "I see God in every human being," she said, "When I wash the leper's wounds, I feel I am nursing the Lord himself. Is it not a beautiful experience?"

Touch and be made clean. It's as simple as that. It's what you and I need to do. Touch and be made clean.

Mother Theresa knew, as Jesus knew, and as we all should know that the world's rules are not God's rules. The world, society, cultures, governments, tribes, families – however you want to define the social and political powers of the prevailing groups that make the rules – creates restrictions that protect its power-base and tries to keep out anything threatening.

Jesus, Mark tells us, is "moved with pity" at the man's request. Other interpretations of the Greek used here are "anger" or "indignation". My favorite suggests that "Jesus' guts were churning." It suggests to me that Jesus is so disturbed by the forces of the powers that be, so disgusted by the fact that this man and many others like him have been pushed aside, that he can no longer take it. He is "moved with indignation" – "his guts were churning" – something had to be done to right this wrong. Afterward, he warns the man not to tell anyone – Jesus "snorts with indignation" the Greek says – and again he is taking on what is unjust and is moved to a state of intolerance over the wrongness of the human-made rules.

Touch the man. It's as simple as that. He is clean. It's as simple as that. He is back in society, back in his family structure, back in the world in which he lives, he no longer has to wear torn clothes and shout "unclean" as people approach. Touch the man and he is whole.

When Jesus touched, when you or I touch another, it's not just the physical interaction which brings the healing. It's God's touch, our heart that accompanies the finger tips. "The best and most beautiful things in the world," wrote Helen Keller, "cannot be seen or even touched - they must be felt with the heart."

In 1993 I was asked to pay a pastoral visit to a man living in an AIDS hospice. I had never encountered AIDS close up before that day. It was something theoretical which I had read about or preached about as a social issue or talked about as I tried to learn more. But I had never looked into the eyes of a person who knew he was dying from such a dreadful disease. As I drove to the hospice, I wrestled with what it was that I was going to do once I got there.

"Can I touch this man? Can I get AIDS from being with him? What if he sneezes while I'm there? What are the risks of me being in the same room with him?" Intellectually I knew that AIDS isn't spread by casual contact. I knew that I could touch him with little or no risk to my own health. I knew that any fears I had were unfounded and linked to my childish cootie fears. But they were still there for me – encountering the unknown – encountering that which society today treats as leprosy – encountering that which could move me to the margins if I caught it. As soon as I arrived at the hospice, I saw men on the front porch in various stages of the diseases that would eventually take their lives and I knew immediately that the greatest disease they suffered from was their lack of contact with the rest of world, their loneliness at being shunned by family and friends and neighbors.

I walked into the room of the young man I was to visit. We talked, we cried, we held hands, we prayed. I didn't get AIDS – I didn't catch cooties. And he in some ways was healed by simply being touched. That's all he wanted. There's no cure. There's only touch. It's that simple. And I was healed by the touch as well.

“Touch is difficult / Touch is the revolution,” wrote US poet Anne Sexton. That's so true. Touch is the revolution to which Jesus calls us. Touch the man. Touch the woman. Touch the child. Heal and be healed by that touch.

My little friend Joel, while I knew him, never quite got the simple lesson we were trying to teach – stop, look, listen. Naaman eventually listened to his advisors and realized that maybe there's something to the simple instructions that God gives us. And Jesus reminded us by his actions that God does act on and through us in very simple ways.

We're so sure it has to be more complicated than that. But it's really not. Touch and be touched. Heal and be healed. Love and be loved. It's really that simple.

Amen.