

“If You Can Imagine Healing, How Will You Pursue It?”

Fellow sojourners and disciples of Jesus, what a gift it is for our two congregations to come together each year on this Independence Day holiday weekend. On this fourth Sunday in the long season of green, growing, ordinary time in the circle of the church year, our shared ecumenical spirit encourages us toward all the work of love embodying and justice building that lies ahead. May we derive strength from our unity within the body of Christ.

As we move into this time of reflection, we acknowledge that this land we now appreciate as Lakeside Park has been loved by the Wahpekute tribe of the Dakota people and myriad other peoples for millennia before white immigrants stole the land – not as the living, breathing friend that it is to us, but as something to be possessed. By God’s grace, may we learn from history and grow to do better. This morning, I invite us to wonder: if you can imagine healing, how will you pursue it? Please join your hearts with mine in prayer.

God of all, help us to sense your presence within and among us now as we acknowledge the individual and collective pain and suffering we encounter each and every day. And as we open ourselves to imagining healing in spaces of pain and suffering and as we envision our own particular agency within your healing ways, O God, grant us the serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Today’s reading from Hebrew scriptures tells the story of Naaman, a commanding officer in the Aramaean army, seeking and receiving healing from the contagious, isolating skin condition of leprosy.

In my childhood, daily Bible study class in my Lutheran grade school made me aware of the isolation experienced by people who suffered with leprosy before and during the time in which Jesus lived. My grandmother's involvement in knitting bandages that would be sent by her Episcopal parish to persons with leprosy made me aware that the condition persisted in my own lifetime.

This week, I visited the CDC's website in order to better understand this rare but persistent illness of the skin. I read this explanation: *"Hansen's disease (also known as leprosy) is an infection caused by slow-growing bacteria called Mycobacterium leprae. It can affect the nerves, skin, eyes, and lining of the nose (nasal mucosa). With early diagnosis and treatment, the disease can be cured. People with Hansen's disease can continue to work and lead an active life during and after treatment. Leprosy was once feared as a highly contagious and devastating disease, but now we know it doesn't spread easily and treatment is very effective. However, if left untreated, the nerve damage can result in crippling of hands and feet, paralysis, and blindness."* (www.cdc.gov/leprosy). I further learned that there are fewer than 20,000 cases per year in the United States and that (and this will sound familiar) it is spread through airborne respiratory droplets.

The piece of information that most impacted me from this brief description of leprosy was the fact that it is a slow-growing bacterial infection and not a condition anyone has from birth. Healing means restoration to a state of wellbeing. Before taking a close look at the movements in today's scripture reading, allowing its plot and characters to encourage our imagining of healing where there is individual or collective pain and suffering in our own contexts, I would like to address the painful reality that healing (restoration) is not always possible.

I offer two types of examples. The first example is individual in nature. Some of us and some of our loved ones live with congenital health conditions – that is, conditions present from birth that either cannot be altered or resist alteration. Many people with congenital health challenges also experiences disabilities. Where healing is not possible, how do people respond to chronic health challenges? I witness people thriving as they openly name areas of physical, mental and chemical chronic challenge and accommodate by seeking support in those areas and leaning into the wholeness and vibrant health present in other aspects of their bodies, minds and spirits. I invite you to close your eyes for an extended moment if you're comfortable doing so. With your eyes closed, I invite you to identify an experience in a particular loved one's health journey where there is not a possibility of full restoration to health. *[pause]* Keeping your eyes closed, I offer two questions for your consideration. **In the circumstance of that chronic health challenge, how are you offering support that honors that person's efforts to thrive? And how are you accommodating your living to best support their thriving?** You may wish to open your eyes again now.

A second example of when healing is not possible is collective in nature. Racism is a collective illness that is pervasive because of how our ancestors adopted racist ideas and programmed racists policies into the operating system of our society. And racism continues to be pervasive to the extent that we accept our societal operating system as is. One of my great hopes for this era is that antiracism work will create cracks and spaces in our White fragility. I hope that we will stop clinging to an understanding of racism as an individual and isolated moral failing by which we sin (that is, separate ourselves from the love of God in each other) by having an isolated racist thought or behavior.

I hope that we will instead gain strength by recognizing our collective complicity in the upholding of racist ideas and policies.

Decades ago, many White folks hoped for racial reconciliation (that is, healing or restoration of relationships). But today's antiracist justice seekers are teaching us to recognize that there were never right relationships between white and BIPOC peoples. Beginning with the arrival of the first White immigrant settlers in this land, White privilege has been built by oppressing black and brown people. Instead of healing, revolution and reconfiguration of our social order is needed in order for societal wellbeing to be established.

It is quite a thing to be celebrating our collective independence as a sovereign nation at a time when many of our country's citizens do not experience freedom. In the wake of the Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, we read and hear vilification of women who seek abortions, depicting women as irresponsible and lacking in compassion. I can't know for sure about each of you, but I have never interacted with a single woman whose decision to have an abortion was made lightly or easily. Yet, here we find ourselves as a nation, collectively stripping women of the freedom to make difficult decisions about their bodies. Is healing possible? Many are saying that this recent Supreme Court decision attempts to relegate women to a status as second-class citizens who are not fully autonomous persons. Yet sexism is a pervasive societal evil, much like racism and other intersectional injustices, all of which have been affecting our operating system since well before our ancestors declared independence as a nation. Yet we are disciples of Jesus, who embodied the possibility of ultimate, ultimate liberation.

I invite you to close your eyes again for an extended moment if you're comfortable doing so. We know in our bones that racism and sexism are congenital illnesses, present since before the birth of our nation. There are not really right relations to be restored to health. **I wonder, what steps will you take to engage in the revolution and reconfiguration of our social order that is needed in order for societal wellbeing to be established amidst racial diversity and amidst gender diversity? How will you personally work within your sphere of influence to resist racism and sexism?** You may wish to open your eyes again now.

Let us turn to hear and examine parts of today's scripture story. As I prepare to speak with you today, I read words in two commentaries that particularly resonated with me. Carrie N. Mitchell, a Presbyterian pastor, wrote about this story of Naaman: *"God employs ordinary people to act in extraordinary ways"* (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3, p. 198*). And Haywood Barringer Spangler, an Episcopal rector *"both the knowledge of God and the truth of our circumstances may come from unexpected sources... God calls people regardless of circumstance"* (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3, p. 197, 199*).

Let's look closely at the movements of several characters in today's story. And I would lift that I feel they embody a difference between the sin of insecurity and the power of autonomy. We know that sin is separation from the love of God embodied in ourselves and in others and that insecurity leads to oppression of others. And we know that we are at heart beloved; that is our connection to God and to one another.

We heard, *"On one of their raids the Arameans captured a young woman who was an Israelite. She served Naaman's wife. One day she said to her mistress, 'If only Naaman would see the prophet who is in Samaria.*

He would cure Naaman's leprosy." The young, enslaved woman embodies one end of the dichotomy – autonomy. Probably with trembling body and trembling voice, in front of those who had enslaved and were oppressing her, she spoke what she saw – the possibility of the power of God working through the prophet of Israel. And so she spoke it aloud with autonomy and power.

We also heard, *"As soon as the ruler of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes, and said, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a fight with me!"* This king embodies the insecurity we find in ourselves when we forget our belovedness, forget how God can work through unexpected people and in unexpected ways. And in his case in that moment, his sense of insecurity manifested itself through defensiveness, through a fight or flight response, and then through pushing back with meanness, ugliness and accusations of others.

And then we heard, *"So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to say to the warrior, 'Go wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed.'"* We see in Elisha the practice of autonomy. He had no reason to go and honor the oppressor by speaking directly to his face if he had not reached a space of forgiveness yet. He knew he could help. He offered that help from a safe space, honoring his own autonomy. And that is sometimes what needs to be done in the face of having been hurt by another.

And then we heard, *“But Naaman went away angry, and said ‘I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand there before me, calling on the name of God and wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn’t I wash in them and be cleansed?’ So he turned and went away in a rage.”* Once again, we see the side of insecurity embodied. Often that comes out as false pride. And we see him feeling very separate from the one who would offer him healing, because it wasn’t happening in his expected way. That insecurity and pride bubble over into rage, and there is a non-starter for any kind healing in that moment.

But then we turn toward grace at the end of the story, and we turn back toward the autonomy of people imagining healing through the power of God and recognizing belovedness. We heard, *‘Naaman’s attendants [again, those without power] went to him saying, “Sir, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he tells you, ‘Wash and be cleansed’?”’* Both the enslaved young woman and these attendants embody the well-known maxim, ‘we can do hard things!’ And so they spoke the possibility of healing that they saw for Naaman.

And finally we heard, *“So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the prophet of God told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a youth.”* As I shared earlier, there are times when healing is not possible in a certain part of our physical or mental health. And there are times when it is! In this story, healing (restoration) of physical health was possible. It took doing hard things. It took humility on Naaman’s part. And I think we can all relate to situations when we went off in a huff because it went the wrong way compared with what we were expecting.

And we had to do the really hard thing of owning our own part in the interaction and returning for the possibility of healing – of restoration.

Friends, we can do hard things and there is so much work to be done. We can be part of revolutionizing and reconfiguring our society where evils of racism, sexism and other intersectional evils have tried to dominate our social order. We can also engage courageously in healing where restoration of health is possible. Let's do the hard work of love building and justice building, because God's Love is counting on us. Amen!

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People's Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
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2 Kings 5: 1-14

