

“What Does Healing Require?”

What does healing require? Friends in person and at a distance, the same Spirit of God – that is, fathomless Love – who has gathered us as community this morning now invites us to wonder together. We respond to the invitation by finding ourselves right now and here on this eighteenth of twenty-four Sundays in the long, green, growing season of Ordinary Time in the circle of the church year, aware that Indigenous Peoples Day (first recognized by the state of Minnesota in 2019 and first recognized by the federal government of the United States in 2021) will be recognized in myriad ways by many people groups across this land tomorrow.

I have recently come to more fully understand and hope that I will grow to more deeply trust this specific insight about healing: **in order for us to be co-creators of healing, the Spirit of God (that is, Love) requires of us an openness to a process whereby we see more clearly, are surprised by what we see, and lean into newly unfolding opportunities for agency.**

Let us pray: God of love, we long for healing in our own lives, in the lives of ones in our personal circles of care, and in the lives of all beings. Take our longings to witness and experience healing and transform them into more radically open postures; so that we might see more clearly, embrace the surprises, and lean into your ways of empowering us to co-create healing with you. This we pray in the name and way of Jesus, a great agent of your healing love. Amen.

Today’s reading from Hebrew scriptures is one we also engaged with this past summer. In concert with many Protestant Christians worldwide, we follow the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary, so it is rare that we hear a given reading more than once every three years.

However, there are regular exceptions for key days like Christmas Eve, Easter and Pentecost. This reading from Second Kings arose as a primary reading back in July and now as an alternative reading for today.

Paired with today's gospel story, I discovered new lessons in the story from Second Kings, seeing it with new eyes. We hear the story of Naaman, a commanding officer in the Aramaean army, seeking and receiving healing from the contagious, isolating skin condition of leprosy – a slow-growing bacterial infection. In any human life, healing manifests in various ways. Healing can look like becoming free from ailments, overcoming unhealthy circumstances, restoration to a state of wellbeing. Let's take a close look at the movements in this story from Hebrew scriptures, allowing its plot and characters to encourage our imagining of healing where there is individual or collective pain and suffering in our own contexts.

Two commentaries on this story have particularly resonated with me. Carrie N. Mitchell, a Presbyterian pastor, wrote about this story, *"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 wrote this: *"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).

I find the most powerful healing in this story to be about being freed from the sins of insecurity and separation and the restoration of agency through recognition of interconnected belovedness. 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 our core identity is that of beloved child of God – forever connected to one another through the love of God.

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 interconnected belovedness.

Possibly with trembling body and voice, in front of those who had enslaved and were oppressing her, she spoke what she saw – the possibility of the healing power of God working through the prophet of Israel. She claimed her agency by speaking aloud what she knew to be true.

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!’”* King Jehoram embodies the insecurity and fear we experience when we let ourselves think that we are separate and all alone in the challenges we face. We forget how God can work through unexpected people and in unexpected ways. In that moment, King Jehoram’s sense of insecurity manifested itself through defensiveness, through a fight or flight response, and then through pushing back by shifting the blame, accusing the king of Aram of wrongdoing.

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 embodied autonomy. He had no reason to go and honor an oppressor of his people by speaking directly to his face if he had not yet reached a space of forgiveness. 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.

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 sin of insecurity embodied. Often that comes out as false pride.

He expresses himself as though his is very separate from the one who would offer him healing, because it wasn't happening in his expected way. That insecurity and pride bubbled over into rage, thwarting any possibility for 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 trusting the possibility for healing through the power of God and recognizing belovedness in themselves and one another. We heard, *"Naaman's attendants 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!' They spoke the possibility of healing that they saw for Naaman.

And in the end of this portion of the story, 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."* In this story, healing was possible in the form of restoration of physical health. It took doing hard things. It took humility on Naaman's part. We can all likely relate to situations when we have reacted defensively or even aggressively because something went the wrong way compared with what we were expecting. And we had to do the hard thing of owning our own part in the interaction and returning for the possibility of healing – of restoration.

I opened by sharing a newly sharpened insight that today's two narratives have offered to me: **In order for us to be co-creators of healing, the Spirit of God (that is, Love) requires of us an openness to a process whereby we see more clearly, are surprised by what we see, and lean into newly unfolding opportunities for agency.**

Let's shift to the gospel story for today.

In a commentary entitled *The New Interpreter's Bible*, R. Alan Culpepper writes the following about Luke's story of the interactions between Jesus and the ten people with leprosy – Culpepper writes: *“In this case, the man's faith was not expressed by his request for help but by his gratitude and praise of God. The other nine had been healed, but only this one received Jesus' declaration of salvation. They got what they wanted, but this one received more than he had dreamed of asking for.”* Words by R. Alan Culpepper.

While the characters in the story of Naaman and Elisha seem to make their way toward healing through an openness to inner processing (where the seeing is about developing insight), the characters in the gospel story demonstrate sight in its external capacity. Let's review the story, watching for moments in which people see more clearly, are surprised by what they see, and lean into unfolding opportunities for agency. We heard,

“On the journey to Jerusalem, Jesus passed along the borders of Samaria and Galilee. As Jesus was entering a village, ten people with leprosy met him. Keeping their distance, they raised their voices and said, ‘Jesus, Rabbi, have pity on us!’”

It is important to note that the writer of Luke is the one gospel voice that specifically humanizes characters by naming them as people with a condition (people with leprosy) instead of (as is often done by authors) labeling them as lepers. The ten people with leprosy saw a person with a reputation for healing power available to all. Then we heard,

“When Jesus saw them, he responded, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’” I imagine Jesus pausing in his tracks, surveying the group, and likely being delightfully surprised by a group of humans of various cultural backgrounds divinely bonded by a common experience and expressing courage together. Then we heard,

“As they were going, they were healed. One of them, realizing what had happened, came back praising God in a loud voice, then fell down at the feet of Jesus and spoke his praises. The individual was a Samaritan.”

The individual opened themselves because of the realization that this famous one – this healer – had invited them into the co-creating process of recognizing the possibility for further healing. They themselves were included. And finally, we heard,

“Jesus replied, ‘Weren’t all ten made whole? Where are the other nine? Was there no one to return and give thanks except this foreigner?’ Then Jesus said to the Samaritan, ‘Stand up and go your way; your faith has saved you.’”

Jesus was a co-creator as he saw the activity of growth in this one fellow human, let it surprise him, let it stand out in his mind, and let it be expressed by sharing with this one that they were now more fully healed, ready for the autonomous, empowered work of continued co-creation of healing opportunities.

Siblings in Christ, may we be co-creators of healing, open to a process whereby the Spirit of God empowers us to see more clearly, surprises us by what we see, and offers a strong presence to lean into as we experience our own unfolding agency. By adopting an open posture toward co-creation with the healing Holy Spirit of Love, we can move toward the healing we desire. Yet, perhaps, in the words of R. Alan Culpepper, we may also *“receive more than [we] dreamed of asking for.”* Love is counting on us. Amen!

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2 Kings 5: 1-3, 7-15, Luke 17: 11-19