

Healing Body and Spirit

Luke 17: 11-19

2 Kings 5: 1-15c

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Access Sunday

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Luke 17: 11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

2 Kings 5: 1-15c

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. 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. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. 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. 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." 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." 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."

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

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Naaman, a great, rich man and a victorious warrior, a hero to his nation, was the ‘Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff’ of his day, the highest-ranking and most senior military officer, and the principal military advisor to the king. He lived lavishly and was welcomed everywhere, admired, honored and respected at all times by the peasants and envied by the elite. The world was indeed his oyster.

But Naaman was holding onto a secret, one that he saw each time his beautiful clothing was taken off, one that was growing, spreading, on his body. For all the power, wealth and position that he had, for all of the enemies he had defeated, Naaman was losing the biggest battle of his life, and it was against himself. Those little white spots here and there on his body, perhaps even slow to have been seen and then given just a quick look of curiosity at first, were now clearly a form of leprosy. His life was becoming redefined by a disease he could not change, could not stop, could not cure, and certainly could not hide much longer. And not just any disease—the worst disease. He would soon find himself plummeting down from the highest social pinnacle and accomplishment peak and into the lowest gutter of rejection and humiliation. Instead of being hailed everywhere he went, he would soon be required by law to wear torn clothing and shout, "Unclean, unclean!" anytime he would encounter an uninfected person. Soon all of his wealth, power, connections and successes would all be gone. His journey into the land of a serious, life-changing, illness had begun.

This powerful man, already seeing his all-to-near-and-forever-future, had already been humbled enough to hear the words of a young, powerless slave girl who served his wife. “If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.”

Risking immediate eviction and exclusion, Naaman dared to tell the king what had happened to him, and gave credit to the slave girl for a possible solution. The king, acting in compassion rather than disgust, sent a letter the king of Israel so that Naaman would be received. He brought all types of treasure to entice the prophet to heal him, seeking to barter the return of his health with gold, silver and garments—all material possessions that will be worthless to him if this plan does not succeed.

Naaman arrived at the home of the prophet and wonder-worker Elisha, expecting to be seen and greeted as a hero, the warrior, the name, that he is. Instead Elisha sent a servant messenger with an odd message. ‘Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.’ The rejection and the isolation because of this disease seems to have begun. This once proud, strong, healthy man is dismissed with a quack cure by an underling of the prophet. Naaman was humiliated and angry, torn between expecting very special treatment because of his fame and position, yet humbled enough to hear and accept the advice of his own servants as he immersed himself seven times in the river. Rising from the water that last time, perhaps foolishly hoping, yet most likely terrified that he was no better off, he saw that the leprosy was gone!

A life being lived—a life of successes and challenges, of routines and special days—until there is a nagging sense that something is not quite right—or the day when something occurs and in just one single moment—life is forever changed. A diagnosis, an injury, an accident, a chronic illness, a permanent birth flaw---any of these can at any time be a part of our lives, and the lives of those we love, as we become travelers from the land of health to the land of serious illness, a

land of medicine, therapy, testing, procedures and possibilities. Roles and identities become different, there is a new language and strange rituals to learn. Being able-bodied, being differently abled, take on new meaning and new definition.

Naaman's experience as he sought help from Elisha—the loss of his identity and sense of worth, the sense of being dismissed, feeling equally foolish and desperate, and then subjected to strange and distasteful procedures — this is very much life on the other side of health and wholeness then and now.

For some who become explorers and then residents in the land of serious illness, there is the unexpected support and compassion received, and the joy and curing that Naaman knew from the waters of the Jordan River as God restored and cleaned him as he followed the guidance and directions from Elisha. He was freed to return to the life he knew, yet also forever changed by the experience, and the healing from the God of an enemy, who healed him from the enemy that was within him.

For some who become explorers and then residents in the land of serious illness, there is the joy and curing that the ten lepers experienced as Jesus cured them on his way to Jerusalem. They received Jesus' healing not passively but in part by their participation. Jesus responded to their call for help, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." It was as they went, they were made clean, they were not only healed from their cruel skin disease but also from the social isolation and marginalization that they had endured. Jesus, faith, made them well in all the ways that reunited them to the life, the community, the people, they knew before disease interrupted and impacted their lives. In our time curing, healing, treating, require deliberate and often invasive and painful methods. Faith, trusting in Jesus' healing grace gives strength and hope for the journey.

This is the message for the Church—capital C church—on Access Sunday. Healing—the welcoming return and acceptance of who we are and where we have been through the life changing illnesses, injuries and realities of our lives, does not happen in isolation. This well-being requires intention and participation in the community of faith as we together we live as the body of Christ, offering and holding up the compassionate love of Jesus in our prayers and our care for others.

UU minister and disability advocate Naomi King¹ describes the church's role to well-being in this way, "Well-being is not curing. We can have well-being and still have illness, including terminal illness. It is in the nature of being human that we are born and we die. It is in the nature of being human we can have illnesses. Human beings are enormously variable. We can have well-being and still live with and in oppressive systems. Well-being is not a binary: one is well or one is not. One can have well-being while experiencing less happifying events. Experiencing oppression and having illness, pain, or disability does not mean you are morally flawed or somehow deserving of those experiences. The wellness culture ideal that says people having pain, illness, or experiences of oppression are because they are not yet free or enlightened is dangerous and harmful. Well-being is different from the ableist expectations of wellness because I reject anything purporting to be wellness that nurtures shame and oppression.

With every limit and with every ability of our bodies and minds, we are the beloved body of Christ. Amen.

¹ <https://revnaomibodyspirit.com/#tve-jump-1704356f4a7>