

*“JESUS’ MINISTRY OF HEALING ... AND OURS”*  
*Sunday, February 15, 2008 – Grace Church, Haddonfield*  
*Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close*

For the past six weeks of Epiphany, we have been almost entirely in the first chapter of Mark’s Gospel. We have been given pictures of Jesus that are meant to help us understand the nature of his ministry and the revelation of what he is all about. The whole emphasis of Epiphany is to help us understand more about Jesus. What has been revealed to us is that Jesus’ ministry is comprised of preaching, teaching and healing. Today’s reading focuses us specifically on healing. We are invited to understand that Jesus is the source of healing, that God has given him the unique ability to bring health back into our lives. Another important aspect of these healings is that in each case, the healing brings about life, a new beginning to the person who encounters God’s miraculous healing.

Today’s readings share two healing stories with us. They have a common theme; both men people have leprosy. We have to understand what leprosy was in the time of Elisha and Jesus. We have no parallel to how leprosy was viewed. First, leprosy did not refer only to what we know as Hansen’s disease today. Leprosy could be any skin disease ... from acne and psoriasis, to skin cancer or liver spots! It referred to any visible skin affliction. The reality was that the person afflicted with leprosy had to deal with the social restrictions placed on them.

We have to remember that people in these times had no understanding of germs, viruses or infections. They were not able to differentiate between what was contagious and what wasn’t. The leper was the subject of fear, revulsion and loathing on the part of people. Leprosy condemned a person to loneliness, isolation, humiliation and banishment. Imagine what your life would be like with the sentence of leprosy ... you would not be permitted to come to church, there would be no interaction with your family and friends, no work, no social interactions. There would be no touch, not life, banishment and dependence on others charity to simply exist.

What was even worse for lepers is that they had to announce their presence ... by calling out to people as they approached. You would be expected to remain 150 yards away from all people. What’s more ... if you got to close to others, they had the right to stone you ... to death! Can you imagine the embarrassment, the devastation that such a life imposed on a person? It’s difficult to imagine such a thing. The other thing to remember is that illness was considered punishment from God. You were sick because of your sin, not because of an unhealthy life style, a germ or disease.

It’s into this understanding that we encounter the healing stories today. First there is the one of Naaman in the Book of Kings. Here is a general, a warrior, a man with power and prestige. Warriors depend upon their ability to win battles and ability to succeed. Despite all this power, there is one thing Naaman can’t do ... he can’t heal himself! His leprosy is the one part of his life that is out of control, beyond his wealth and possessions, beyond his ability to change.

Naaman is a Syrian, an enemy of Israel. In his household is a slave girl, probably taken on some raid into Israel. It is this girl, the lowest of low on the social calendar, a woman and a slave that speaks of a prophet, a man of God, who can heal Naaman. The remarkable

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thing is that Naaman listens to her! He goes to the king and asks for a letter of introduction. He hopes to secure his healing by taking money and possessions to buy his health. How radical is this? It would be the equivalent of our being told that we could be healed, by going to Tehran!

The king of Israel is appalled at the request of healing. He thinks it is an impossible task that will be used to start a war. When Elisha hears this, he sends word to the king to let Naaman come to him. When Naaman shows up, Elisha sends out a servant. There is no face-to-face meeting! This is not the typical response that a high-ranking general expects! Even more astounding, he tells him to go wash in the Jordan River seven times!

Now let me explore what the Jordan looked like ... it was not the grand view of the Delaware River that separates us from Philadelphia. It was more like the muddy, sluggish Cooper River on the north side of town! Remember the number seven? In the Bible, this is a coded notion for completion, perfection, or wholeness. All this would have been lost on Naaman ... he's just mad! But his servants plead with him. They point out he would have done a great task if requested. Again, remarkably, Naaman listens to those around him, goes to the Jordan, washes and ... is healed! A miracle!

What we see in this story is the power and authority of Naaman bowing to obedience and humility! Naaman listens to those under him; a risk by doing what Elisha required and is healed! He moves from illness to health, from the end of his career and life to a new beginning! God has acted to heal an enemy of Israel. God has offered a new life to a stranger!

Now let's jump hundreds of years forward to Mark's Gospel. Many of the same attitudes mentioned before still apply. There are some noteworthy differences. Here we see the leper taking a great risk. He has heard of a great rabbi with the power to heal the sick. The leper is desperate for healing. A desire to be whole and the belief, faith, that Jesus can heal him drives him forward. Maybe this is something we can identify with ... the willingness to go to any lengths to be healed. But the leper faced great obstacles. What if Jesus refused? What if the crowd of people around him stoned him to death before he could even get near Jesus?

I am struck by the leper's words to Jesus, "You can heal me ...IF YOU CHOOSE ..."  
Wow! After all of this, the leper puts himself in Jesus hands, it is his choice. The pleading stops, the trust waits for a response. Jesus is moved by compassion (I like this word better than pity, I think it is closer to what really happened). He says yes, and he does the unthinkable, he touches the untouchable! Once again the miracle of healing happens. This time, faith and trust have lead to a miracle. This is a story about restoration, renewal and new life for the man! In Jesus we see the true power of God at work! What is also important is that Jesus moves through the fear, loathing and revulsion that exist ... to bring life to the man!

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**This is powerful stuff. What are we to make of it now! I think there is more than our desired to be healed ourselves. God offers healing, wholeness and restoration. These stories of healing show that ... but there is something else. What we are being asked today is to continue the healing ministry of Jesus Christ. The words of the leper to Jesus are the words directed to us ... we can participate and cooperate in the healing of others ... IF WE CHOOSE.**

**I want you to reach out and take someone’s hand right now. Hold their hands for a few moments. Do you know what’s missing in this day and age? The miracle of touch. We have it in our power to be agents of Christ’s healing, and sometimes it’s as simple as a touch. Place your hands on a person’s shoulders near you. There is something reassuring about touch ... something that brings a sense of relief and hope and healing.**

**Unfortunately, we have new social taboos that demand we don’t touch each other, exactly when what we need is the reassurance of touch. Teachers can’t hug kids, especially the ones who so desperately need it. Coworkers risk being accused of harassment with a gentle slap on the back, while other workers suffering from isolation and loneliness yearn for the affirmation of touch.**

**What we need to find is the healing touch, the appropriate amount of touch that can bring with it a sense of compassion and healing. In hospital visits, I always take the person’s hands, touch them on the shoulder. At church, when someone looks lost or hurting, I will ask him or her if they want a hug. Out computer, television age has isolated us from so much of needed touch that is required for health! Maybe it’s time for us to reclaim our healing ministry and start with the simple acts of appropriate touch.**

**We are called to be disciples of Christ and to be agents of healing. We can operate out of the same kind of compassion and care that Jesus expressed to the leper. Do we choose to help others? It’s not so much about our seeking our won healing, but more about responding to the needs of others. It’s not about power or control, but about faith and humility. Let’s reach out and be healers, like Christ, and begin to bring some healing to our world. When we do, we will discover the depth of God’s love and hope for a new world taking place!**

**May we become the new ministers of healing in our world ... in the name of Jesus. Amen!**