

Sermon for July 4, 2010 - 2 Kings 5:1-14 - "The easy fix, and the hard cure."

When I was a child, I hated hospitals. I think it had to do with the fact I'd had to have my tonsils out at age 3. This was before hospitals were "kid friendly" and before the advent of day surgery. It had not been a happy experience and by the age of 9 I had made up my mind that I would never go to another hospital.

Around that same age some of my friends started having to get stitches. They made them sound much more dramatic than they were. All I knew was that they sounded horrible and not only did I never want to go to the hospital, but I especially never wanted to get stitches.

One afternoon I was playing around in the garage and I tried to remove a nail from a board with a hammer. The board flipped up and hit me in the head. A few moments later I realized there was a lot of blood. Well, maybe not a lot of blood, but more than I had ever seen at the age of 9.

I ran inside and tried to stop the bleeding. I used an entire box of Kleenex trying to end it. Then I tried to close the wound with a small Band-Aid. Nothing was working. Defeated, I finally showed my dad what had happened. He looked and replied confidently, "Oh you just need a couple stiches."

On the way to the hospital I argued that I was fine. I told my parents the bleeding would stop soon. They kept driving. My mom said that if I didn't get stitches I would have a scar. I told her I could live with that. They kept driving. Finally, I ended up in the place I feared most, about to get the very treatment I most dreaded.

Now, a small wound requiring stitches is not leprosy. But, in a way, I could sympathize with Naaman, the man who seeks healing in today's passage. He is suffering. He has leprosy and, although he is a soldier who wins battles and is respected, all he can think about is this leprosy.

So he tries to get healed. His wife is an Israelite, so he thinks that maybe her Lord can heal him. He goes first to the king, who can't do anything. Then he goes to Elisha, and a note is sent in to him. Elisha doesn't even come to the door. Instead he does this. He sends out word. "Go to the Jordan River. And jump in. Seven times."

Naaman is understandably a little dubious. First, if Elisha, and the Lord, were so great, surely Elisha could have just said to heal him and all would have automatically been fixed. Instead, Naaman has to go to this foreign river and wash himself in it not once,

not twice or three times, but seven times.

He probably left thinking that Elisha was a quack. The text tells us that he all but decides on the spot not to even try it.

But he has a wise servant. The servant asks him, “if he had said to do something harder, you would have done it, right? You want to get rid of this right?” And Naaman says yes. So the servant says, “well what can it hurt? Go try it.”

Some Naaman does. And he washes seven times.

Now, like me, Naaman wanted to choose how he was going to be healed. I wanted anything but stitches, and Naaman wanted anything but to have to follow some crackpot instructions about bathing seven times in the river. But we both did it, and we were both healed.

Naaman’s story is one about God’s healing first of all. God healed his body and restored it. But it goes much deeper than that. Naaman’s story is also one about accepting healing that doesn’t come on your own terms.

Naaman knew how he wanted to be healed. And I knew how I did not want to be healed. But we both had to accept healing on someone else’s terms. And ultimately, both worked really well. I felt a little pin prick from the Novocaine and then nothing. An hour later I was sewn up, a week or so later the stitches came out and I didn’t even have a cool scar to show for it. Naaman jumped in the river seven times, and all of a sudden his skin looked as good as it did in his youth. It was the end result we wanted. Maybe even better than what we wanted. But it wasn’t our initial choice.

What I’ve learned as I’ve gotten older is how much I like having healing on my own terms. You all remember I was in the ER last week. I’ve worked as an ER chaplain before, so I don’t mind the ER anymore. I just mind it when I’m the patient. I did not want to be there. I tried everything to avoid going there. But in the end, healing did not come on my terms.

Maybe you’ve had something similar. And we aren’t just talking about physical illness here. Maybe there has been something in your life that required healing. Maybe an addiction, or a relationship, or something else.

Now, it’s not a bad thing to want things to get better. And, it’s not a bad thing to have some idea of how to do that. But sometimes we work ourselves into a corner without

ever realizing it. Sometimes we are so intent on controlling our cure, that we miss the chance to accept the healing that might be right in front of us.

Jumping in the river seven times is not a prescription many of us will get in our lifetimes. But there are others that seem just as bizarre at first glance. If you've ever gone to a 12-step meeting of any kind, you might have seen this sign describing something called the Twelve Steps. These are twelve things suggested to a person healing from an addiction. And the first time you see them, you might think they are really out-dated and make no sense whatsoever.

They are certainly not resistant to medicine or psychology, but there's no talk about those fields in them. Instead you do things like improve your relationship to God, look at your own character defects, make amends, help others. No where in them does it say, "this is how you stop drinking" or "this is how you stop drugging". At first glance, to the person who needs specific help, it often seems really not helpful.

And yet, for some reason, it works. It actually works really well. Untold numbers of folks have found healing and new life in the twelve steps. But for many of them, the first time they saw them, they might as well have been told to go jump in the river seven times. It's not an easy fix. But it's a lasting cure.

Most of us like easy fixes. We want to be able to handle problems quickly, and easily and with minimum pain, and then be done with them. If you've ever had something go wrong in your house and, instead of calling a plumber or a carpenter you've instead reached for a roll of duct tape, you probably know what I mean.

But, though I believe in the power of duct tape, we often find that the easy fix is not the same as the cure. The pipe bursts again. The shelf gives way. The power cord gives out. And then you have to figure it out all over again. And suddenly that hard cure you avoided earlier on, looks a little more promising.

One of the truths about our faith stories is that easy fixes usually never work in the Bible. It's the hard cures that win the day. Jonah gets called to do something he doesn't want to do, so he tries the easy fix of fleeing from God. And, he ends up in the belly of a whale. The only cure becomes to listen to God and do what God is calling him to do.

Paul persecutes the new faith community and tries the easy fix of trying to have them all arrested or silenced. And then he ends up blind in the middle of a road, struck down by the realization that he can't run from God's grace. It was a hard cure.

Peter and the others were fishing in a boat and couldn't land anything. And then Jesus gets in, tells them where to cast, and their nets are full. It looks like an easy fix. But then they find out they have to leave all of that behind to become disciples. Their lives are changed forever. And the life of faith becomes their hard cure.

I say "hard cure" and that makes it sound harder than it is. Really what makes the cure so hard is not what is asked of us, but rather our resistance to it. Jumping in the river seven times isn't hard. But it takes a while to get behind the idea mentally.

Working the twelve steps isn't always pleasant, but it isn't hard. Listening to God instead of running from God isn't always the first thing we want to do, but it isn't hard. What's hard is changing our resistance to things and opening ourselves up to the chance to feel grace in new ways.

And grace, paradoxically, is hard. It's not hard to get. It comes automatically from God. But it's hard to accept. It's often right there in front of us, and we will look for the easy, limited, fix before we will accept grace. Because deep down we know that grace changes everything. Because grace not only frees us from things. It also frees us for things.

I had a friend who had epilepsy. And it wasn't the kind where you have an occasional seizure. She had seizures almost every day. A few years ago, a major hospital had made enough strides in a particular kind of brain surgery that they offered it to her. And she debated whether or not to do it. She had learned how to manage her life. But she knew it could be better. So she had the surgery, and became almost entirely seizure free. In the aftermath, the biggest worry for her was not when the next seizure would hit, but instead, what did she do now. What did she do with this life now that she had received incredible healing? What did she do with this new found freedom?

We don't know much about what happened to Naaman after he emerged from the river. We know he gave his allegiance to God and praised God, but we don't know about his life afterwards. What was it like to suddenly live a leprosy free life? What was it like to not have to worry? To not be the subject of scorn? To be healed?

I hope it was good. I hope that Naaman experienced it as freedom for new life, not just freedom from leprosy. I hope Naaman experienced that compelling grace that calls us to not just be complacent. Because true healing, true grace, is not something you can just keep to yourself. You have to share it. You have to pass it on.

And that's why we are here. Someone, God has touched our lives. Somehow we have moved beyond easy fixes and we have found wholeness. Somehow we have become

living examples of God's grace. Our job, as we emerge the seventh time from the river, is to determine how we share that grace with others. It isn't a job we expected when we went looking for the easy fix. But it's one we accept with joy as we live in cure. Amen.