

Sermon for February 11, 2018 (Epiphany6B) “Get In The River”  
(Based on 2 Kings 5:1-14 and Mark 1:40-45)

Healing is a contact sport. No matter what you think of last Sunday's game—and the creepy coincidence of the Eagles reference in that day's lectionary reading, the Bible is clear on certain rules of the game... I mean, when it comes to stories of healing. In almost every one of these stories, if you want to be healed, you have to make contact: let yourself be touched by someone or something: the hand of a rabbi or a prophet or a priest, or let your skin be streaked with mud, or bring your whole self down to the river and get right in. Never mind if it wasn't the exactly the nicest, cleanest river or lake or pool. If that was where the healer told you to go, you went in. You had to make contact.

You were also supposed to ask nicely, to approach with deference and respect, keep your distance a bit until the disciples or the temple staff gave you the go-ahead. But—you've probably noticed—being sick is irritating. Discomfort and pain have a way of making you impatient and easily upset.

And that's our starting point, with both our stories today. We begin with two men who really, really want some healing, and they are tired of waiting. The leper in Mark's gospel is so ready to be healed that he goes against convention. Even though he's considered unclean, he goes right up to Jesus. The science of their day suggested that quarantine was a pretty reliable control method. They may not have had the germ theory of disease, but they'd figured out that if a person had obvious signs of disease, you shouldn't touch them, because you might catch...well, there, it gets unclear. Maybe an evil spirit? Maybe the taint of some terrible sin? Maybe you'd just catch their bad luck.

Yet this man, unwanted and unclean and untouchable, who should have stayed far away due to his leprosy, comes up to Jesus, gets right in his face, kneels, and then he doesn't ask, he *tells* Jesus, “I believe you can heal me.” Who is he, to tell the Messiah his job? This outcast, this undesirable, deplorable, untouchable man, somehow has the trust and the conviction and the courage to go right up to Jesus. And you know how Jesus responds? He is moved. He is deeply moved—the Greek word here is one that

means “intense emotion,” and the earliest translations say, “Jesus was angered...” Jesus was upset—not by the man's request, but by the tangled mess of damage and despair and dehumanization that framed his situation. Young and inexperienced as Jesus was, he knew how it felt to be dehumanized. He knew how it felt to be cast out, unwelcome. And the leper's combination of vulnerability and courage moved him to action. He reached across that tiny, vast divide, found his own courage to make contact, touched someone unclean, and the healing happened—maybe for both of them.

It didn't work quite that way for General Naaman. You want to talk about fear? His whole career had been built on it. And the rules of his profession had trapped him, isolated him just as completely as the leper that Jesus healed. He looked powerful—he was fully armoured with money and status and all the trappings of power—and that armour had done nothing to protect him from disease, disfigurement, or despair.

He did what he knew how to do—paid for expensive doctors, went to the opulent spas frequented by people of his status, bought rare healing compounds and the finest linen dressings, and did his best to keep his illness under wraps, because what he couldn't afford was to have anyone see him wincing and weak. His professional survival depended on it.

You know who helped him get healed? A Jewish slave girl. Now, her professional survival depended on following the rules, too—figuring out the language and lines of power in her place of captivity, keeping out of the way, bowing to every whim of Naaman's wife—but she came from another place and a different faith. She knew about other kinds of power. She knew about the power of invitation and welcome, the power of faith in a God who walks with refugees for 40 years in the desert. And she had seen the prophet Elisha in action. She knew about the power of healing.

Of course, living in a general's household, she also knew about the chain of command. So she told Naaman's wife, so Naaman's wife could tell him. And Naaman asked his commanding officer—the king of Aram. And the king—being a king, playing by *his* usual rules—saw this as a great way to gather some intelligence for a future raid,

so he granted his approval.

Naaman has a chance to be healed, but—even with his disease, he's still a general. So he packs for the trip like it's another military campaign: huge entourage, massive war chests of silver and gold, and-- I love this detail—10 sets of clothes. He surrounds himself with the trappings that make him feel safe and whole, no matter how much they slow his progress towards his goal. And when he finally reaches the prophet Elisha, what does the prophet tell this elegant, well-dressed, well-armed general to do? Get in the river. Forget the silver and the gold. Don't put fancy gifts on the altar. Don't seek elaborate rituals with incense and orchestrated music. Get in the river. Because healing is a contact sport. Walk down to the muddy, shallow waters of the Jordan, and get in the river.

Naaman gets stuck again, trapped not only by the weight of his armour, but by the weight of his expectations. He says, “the rivers back home are better. I remember how those waters shine, how sweet and beautiful and clean. Your water can't match mine.” But Elisha knows what Naaman's not ready to admit: the waters we grew up don't always carry healing, no matter how their memory shines.

It's another servant who helps Naaman get unstuck this time. A servant who brings that particular survival skill of knowing how things are put together—houses and household goods, clothes, armour—and how they come apart. So he sees what's holding Naaman up. “Are you afraid of the water? Afraid of coming in contact with something that seeps in between all your hard edges, afraid of letting the dirt and water of others touch your tough and damaged skin? If this was a battle, you'd know what to do, wouldn't you?”

And the words of a captured Jewish slave girl, and the words of another servant, and the words of a foreign prophet, and the waters of a river From Away, together did for Naaman what all his trappings and status, his menace and might, couldn't do for him. They made contact with the soft, wounded tissue of this man, the fragile holder of his heart. He made contact with the water. He got in the river, and it healed him.

When I was in Baltimore—a city with its own history of fear and pain, a city with its own beautiful and muddy waters—the president of Pacific School of Religion, David Vásquez-Levy, shared a message with us at the UCC General Synod. He said, we need to hear these voices that speak with such courage from the margins. Our own sources cannot accomplish all the healing we need. We need to step beyond our own structures of defense, our own understandings of power, so we can walk down and let ourselves be washed by the waters that will heal our illness. That's where the courage comes. That's where we will be seen, and recognized, in all our honest pain. It's where we will be known and loved and healed.

I'll close with the words of Marvin K. White, a graduate of PSR who worked with David Vásquez-Levy to create a poetic reflection on this healing story. It's called, “Beck and Call:”

Naaman, a river don't have to bend you  
A river won't cry for you  
A river can only cry *to* you.  
Get in the river, Naaman  
A river comes and goes as it pleases  
Do not think, Naaman,  
that it's supposed to stand for your foolishness  
A river won't stand for it.  
a river won't stand for nothing.  
A river is supposed to run, because  
a river is supposed to make you think about the sores,  
about outpouring, and washing away, and being cleansed,  
and one day soon, being baptised, and making glad the city of God.  
Get in the river, Naaman  
Naaman, a river comes from rivers  
that ran out of Eden  
rather than being caught there.  
Moving with it is called swimming  
Standing up to a river is called drowning.  
Get in the river, Naaman.

*--Preached by Rev. Holly S. Morrison, pastor  
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