

Pastor Kris Litman-Koon

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

¹¹On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹²As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” ¹⁴When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? ¹⁸Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” ¹⁹Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

“Be sure to give thanks to God.” That could be the only message we leave with today. It definitely is something we teach children, and giving thanks to God is not a bad idea. It’s rather simple, actually. Yet, we are complex people. For any number of reasons, some of us today have elation in our hearts, and some of us today have lament. Some of us have both of those today, and some of us have neither. It is quite possible – as the complex people we are – that at this moment you are trying to figure out if you can narrow your answer down to just two of those four. My point is we are complex. A moralism like “Give thanks to God” is something good for us to do in general, but if that is today’s only message, it could be painful to hear because it can come across as insensitive to what we are feeling today. Likewise, the message “give thanks to God” isn’t the good news that brings us life. God brings life, not moralisms. Today’s readings go beyond a simple moralism, they offer us insight into how God brings life.

The stories of Naaman and the ten lepers have some interesting parallels beyond the healings that occur. First of all, we should notice how social positions factor into both stories. Naaman is a revered and mighty warrior, yet it is a young slave girl from Israel who says that the prophet Elisha in her homeland can cure him of his disease. The king of Israel cries out that nothing can be done, but the lowly prophet Elisha says, “Send Naaman to me.” Naaman arrives on chariot at the home of the lowly prophet, yet it is an even more lowly messenger who steps out to say, “Go wash in the Jordan River seven times.” Naaman is incensed. How dare Elisha treat him like this! Naaman literally says, “I thought that *for me* he would surely come out!” So the slaves of Naaman have to stroke his ego in order to point out that he would have done a difficult task if the prophet had prescribed it, so he should just do the simple task. Of course it works out for Naaman when he does all this. See how social position plays into all this? The lowly are all saying, “This healing can happen,” while the mighty ask, “How can this be done?” The story lays out a scenario where healing is open to all, but our social position impacts our receptivity to God’s work in our lives. Likewise, the ten lepers in the gospel story plead for mercy from Jesus, who gives them very simple instructions, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” They have virtually no social location, so every one of them is receptive to these simple instructions that Jesus gives. No elaborate protocol is required; they just listen and go.

Stories of healings in scripture offer us reassurances that God is fully invested in our well-being, seeking that we be whole in our mind, body, and soul. God is the source of our experience of wholeness and wellness, yet there are factors that can throw us off from that message. For Naaman, his higher social position made him think that he is worthy of some spectacular healing. Anything less than that would not suffice. Naaman was confusing his own glory with God’s glory. We are all susceptible to that kind of thinking: that we deserve special treatment. Unfortunately, that thinking can lead us to not recognizing when God is working in small or mundane ways.

The character of Naaman also serves as an example of how we can convince ourselves that “healing” must take shape in a particular manner. For him, he wanted only to receive physical relief. Yet, I’m sure that the way this story played out brought Naaman a needed dose of humility. You see, it is wholeness that we should seek: mind, body, spirit, emotions, relationships, etc. There is a pastoral exercise I’ve used in the past with others where we use a piece of paper to visually represent the wellness of our whole selves. The results have shown that no one is proportionately well-rounded in every aspect of their whole selves, including me. And the results of this exercise can change month to month. The point of the exercise, though, is that God seeks for us to find wholeness in our lives, and sometimes we aren’t even aware that we need this healing. Quite often we may be led, like Naaman, to think that healing of a particular sort is what we require, when in fact what God seeks for us is wholeness. There is good news, though: like the Samaritan in the gospel lesson, we are all being “made well.” It likely occurs in subtle ways, and it is a long process, but being made well does take place.

Notice how borders factor into today’s lessons. Naaman crosses the border to enter Israel, and most notably Jesus encounters the ten men in the borderland between Galilee and Samaria. Yet, what is a border? It is something that people use to denote that on this side you can expect one thing, and you can expect something else on the other side. Often a border is used to connote safety; on this side you will be safe, but there is no guarantee of it on the other side. For the Galileans and the Samaritans there was a border that demarcated cultural and religious differences. Each side worshiped “God,” but they both had different practices and viewpoints on it. So both sides were claiming God, and they likely didn’t discuss God’s activity on the other side of the border. Caught in the middle is this small village where the ten men lived. Neither side desired to claim this borderland, and neither side would likely speak of God’s activity there. Most Galileans and Samaritans would likely have agreed that this borderland was godforsaken. Yet it is in this zone that neither side desired that Jesus did something special: he made it holy. By bringing healing to those ten

men, Jesus allows them to return and be fully engaged in their communities. This borderland that once symbolized their hopelessness and forsakenness becomes the symbol of God's action.

First of all this story reminds us that people on the other side of the border – or caught between borders – bear the image of God. If voices dehumanize others and desire for us to fear the other, then we must tune those voices out. Fear is an easy emotion to manipulate in order to control others; we must remember God's call for us to see the image of God in all people. Another important takeaway is that when humans designate something as hopeless – whether that's a person, a situation, or a location – God can do great work there. Because God desires that we experience wholeness – shalom – that peace that transforms mind, body, spirit, emotions, and relationships.

That is the good news that I hope you hear today. Wherever you are in your journey; whether you feel you have everything pulled together or you feel a thread is all that holds it together; God is there, seeking for you to find wholeness for your life. It may not be radical or even extravagant, and it may take a long time to get there. Like I said earlier, we are complex, so I can't say each of us can achieve wholeness with my patented three easy steps. Yet, know that God always desires to lead us to being made well, and for that ongoing activity of God in our lives, we give thanks. Seek each day where it is that God desires for you to have wholeness – mind, body, spirit, emotions, and relationships – and live each precious moment savoring the goodness of God.

Amen.