

“Compassionate Community”
II Kings 5:1-14 & Mark 1:40-45
San Dimas Community Church, UCC
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The lectionary texts form an outline of stories throughout the Bible over a three year period. The lectionary texts for the last two weeks are healing stories. This particular healing story from the Hebrew scripture is a particularly intriguing one. The story of Naaman reads like an international relations nightmare. To begin with: what is the God of Israel doing healing an enemy of the state, named Naaman? It would be tough for Israel to imagine that God cares about people other than God’s “chosen” ones, especially a warrior in the land of Aram? It would be like God caring about the Palestinians living in Gaza.

In this story the *servants* have important. Naaman’s *servant* girl was an Israelite captured in a prior raid. She reveals that there’s someone in Israel who can heal her master’s leprosy. When Naaman goes to Israel with a letter from his King of Aram to the King of Israel, King Jehoram, feels like he’s been given an impossible ultimatum--*heal Naaman of leprosy*. But even Israel’s King can’t do that; he doesn’t have that kind of power, is he going to be forced into a war over a misconception that he has the power to heal?

Elisha’s servant plays an important role. Rather than take the time to go himself Elisha sends his *servant* to carry the prescription for healing to Naaman. Poor Naaman thinks that proper diplomacy, at the very least, calls for a ceremonial welcome by the prophet Elisha. (None of this “my people will talk to your people, stuff.)

Naaman is an important man even if he does have leprosy, and he deserves a face to face meeting with Elisha. When Naaman feels snubbed by Elisha he says, “to heck with it, I’ll return to my country, my waters, and deal with my leprosy there.” Perhaps his anger is a sign of the deep hurt that the alienation of leprosy caused him. Only his servants, who probably had no choice in the matter, would get close to one with this disease. It is these servants who have the wisdom to tell Naaman to just do it: “wash seven times and be clean.” And he is healed.

Several weeks ago I began to truly understand how devastating leprosy must be. After a couple of days of a persistent rash, my friend, Susan, a nurse practitioner offered to come look at it. She immediately diagnosed it as shingles. But the most painful part was when Tom started to enter the room and she held up her hand and said “STOP, you have to leave.” After being constant companions for two months, now when I was sick, he couldn’t be with me. We both were heartbroken.

In today’s gospel text we see how Jesus’ too was heart broken when he saw people sick. He felt compassion and he felt something else: The word “pity” in Mark’s text is also interpreted as “anger”. Jesus was angry at the havoc that disease wrecked on people. It took him no time at all to *choose* to make the leper well.

No one deserves to be sick. God’s deepest longing for all God’s beloved creation is health and wholeness so God creates compassionate communities for the work of healing in the world. That doesn’t mean we can always be cured or live forever because God works with the world as it is: its limitations as well as its possibilities.

But God’s heart and Jesus’ heart feels the pain that is caused by illness and longs for healing. Tommy Dorsey knew the pain of his wife’s and newborn’s deaths when he wrote the song, *Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand, I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;*

Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light: Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

As faithful people, like Jesus chose, we choose to create compassionate communities whenever we lift up the names of people in prayer every Sunday and when we do for others what they cannot do for themselves. We align ourselves with God's compassionate community when we join our efforts with others working for health care not just for the privileged Naaman's of today but for everyone, rich or poor, executives or janitors, politicians or stay at home mom's and dad's.

We join God's compassionate community when, as Jesus did, we feel both anger and compassion when we see people devastated by disease and isolated from the companionship of others. We share God's compassionate community when we take note of the fact that God blesses Naaman, a foreigner, an enemy of the state, with the gift of wellness. God's mercies are not limited by borders or nationalities.

I have always been in awe of medical missionaries, doctors without borders, and others who take on extraordinary models of compassionate communities. Here's a story from one medical missionary that our One Great Hour of Sharing offering supports:

Dr. Henry is a medical missionary at the Mungeli Christian Hospital in India. A 12-year-old girl named Eswari came to him in great distress. Whenever she opened her mouth blood gushed out so she clenched her mouth tightly together. It soon became clear that she needed surgery to repair a vascular anomaly even though the risks of losing her on the operating table was quite high.

She was given a blood transfusion which stabilized her and her parents agreed to round up family members for more blood donations so that the surgery could be performed that same evening.

By 10:00 PM after six hours of surgery and several units of blood, she was stable and the doctors thanked God for guiding them through this very difficult ordeal. When it came time to pay for Eswari's care, her father was able to get together the equivalent of \$14. That day Dr. Henry's medical team performed 14 surgeries.

When Eswari came back two weeks later she was smiling and laughing. Dr. Henry writes, ***Yes, miracles still happen! We find ourselves challenged to the maximum, but making a difference in peoples' lives, in spite of our very limited circumstances convinces us that being in this place at this time has its purposes and opportunities to witness God's grace making humanly impossible things happen.***

Dr. Henry's is an extraordinary calling, but we're all called in our own ways to be part of God's compassionate community. I understand much better than I ever did before what being on the receiving end of a compassionate community means: cards of care and encouragement, emails of hope, dinners cooked and delivered, chores done, trash cans brought in from the curb, many simple acts of kindness--they all make one feel less alone, less vulnerable, less isolated.

The lectionary texts are focusing us on stories not just of healing but of the compassionate communities that God creates around those who need to be healed. The scriptures says that Jesus *chose* to heal the man with leprosy. *We, too, can make a deliberate choice* and touch each other with the love and compassion of the Christ, and we can extend both near and far the compassionate community of a God who loves us with a great love, a love that knows no beginning and no end. AMEN.