

**St. Francis Church**  
**A Service of Public Healing**  
**Text: II Kings 5:1-14**

How many ways can you say it? Naaman is an important man—a military man—an accomplished man—a mighty man—a Syrian man. One verse packed with powerful adjectives that help us to paint a mental picture of this commander of the king's army, this man of valor.  
*But...*

There is always a “but,” isn't there? No one has it all. It is the one thing I've learned in pastoral ministry—especially serving in places like Westport, CT and Holden, MA. That even for people whom we think may have it all—important job, fancy car, lovely home, honor students—there is always a “but.” In Naaman's case, it's that he's a leper.

Naaman has the resources to get the best healthcare imaginable. No walk-in clinics for him! He takes with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten festal garments to pay the physician. The note in my old Oxford Annotated Bible (published in 1977) says that's about \$80,000. Even without accounting for inflation or the rising costs of healthcare over the past thirty years or so, \$80,000 dollars buys a lot of healthcare.

Elisha the prophet sees this as an opportunity—a chance to bear witness to the healing power of the God of Israel. The opportunity is not for financial gain because God's healthcare plan is free—all Naaman has to do is go wash seven times in the Jordan River, and not only will his flesh be restored, but he will be *clean*. It's not about money—but about the abundance of God's grace that extends even to Syrian lepers.

But to Naaman the river-water-cure just sounds like just an old wives' tale! He's furious. He is prepared to pay good money for the best doctors and the latest technology—for machines that go “beep” and doctors who promise the newest drugs. “Surely the rivers or Damascus are better than the rivers in Israel?” he replies in disgust. “If that's all it takes, is a swim in the river...”

Naaman has some pretty practical servants, however, who are willing to speak honestly to him: “If the prophet told you to do some great thing you would have done it. So what harm can come of doing this easy thing? Go down and wash in the River Jordan—what's the worst thing that could happen?” He does...and his skin is like a baby's bottom! A miracle!

It's a wonderful story. And there's even more to the story—which I don't have time to go into tonight, but if you aren't familiar with it I encourage you to go back to II Kings 5 and keep reading from where we left off...because the story gets more and more interesting as it continues to unfold...For tonight, however, this is enough.

I remember a Geritol commercial when I was growing up. (Now I'm not even 100% sure what exactly Geritol is, or even if they still make it!) But the line was: “if you've got your health, you've got just about everything.” I remember the line because it's something my grandmother loved to say. Well, Naaman is just the opposite: he has just about everything, *except* his health.

His particular disease keeps him isolated and odd. His money can't buy him health, and that seems to be one point of the story at least.

But even if the best doctors in the world can't help him—even though he is all too willing to pay—God can heal him for nothing. God can do it because God is in the healthcare business not for profit, but because it is at the heart of who God is. God loves, and God desires abundant life for all people. So God heals—and makes whole.

We should remember, though, that healing is not always the same as a “cure”—and on a night like this we do well to remember that. Sometimes people dying of cancer die of that cancer. But they die more whole, and more at peace with God and reconciled to family. Trust me that can be an answer to prayer and an authentic healing; because it is just as possible to let cancer take the best part of you—your soul—and leave you bitter and angry at the end as well.

Cures are great and it's fair enough to pray for them and we should give thanks when they are given. Sometimes that happens in ways that medical science and rational people cannot explain—and sometimes with an explanation no better than “he went and washed in the Jordan River.” Sometimes healing happens through the simple things, not the complex ones. They aren't glamorous, and they rarely get written up in the *New England Journal of Medicine*—but that doesn't make them less real. It's left to us—the Church—to keep telling these kinds of stories, and to remember that our God is an awesome God who can heal us of all that ails us.

Whether or not there is the cure we pray for, however, we can remember that healing may not always bring a cure, but that it does always bring the power and presence of God to bear on our lives—cure or no cure. Where God is present there is health. And we pray for our own receptivity to that free gift—that costs us nothing.

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I am also mindful of the season, and the time of our gathering. In less than forty-eight hours we'll be gathering here to celebrate the eve of our “dear savior's birth.” That is an occasion of great joy for us as Christians—the feast of the Incarnation.

We must never forget the joy of this season. And yet, it is all too easy in our society to do just that—not only because of the frenzy and the consumerism of this month, but also, I think because of the old wounds and grudges that we still carry around with us. The time between Thanksgiving and Christmas opens up a lot of that for us—of fallen firefighters in Worcester, of families that couldn't measure up to the Cleavers or the Bradys—of depression and anxiety and isolation—of the temptations that abound for addicts of all kinds.

So it isn't just Naaman's story we consider tonight. Always when we encounter God's Word we bring our own stories with us—our own dis-ease, our own “leprosy” if you will. Our own “but...” For like Naaman, we come as “credentialed” people—perhaps with lots of positive adjectives others use to describe us. But here—at this table we are also allowed to bring—expected to bring—the rest of us as well: our hurt and our weakness and our brokenness—and all

those parts of us that may be less obvious than leprosy but that nevertheless keep us from becoming what God desires for us.

We come here—to the Table of our Lord—to be reminded week after week of our Baptism, which tells us that we are beloved of God, and because every now and again we need to be reminded of that. The oil with which Darrell and I will anoint those who so desire it reminds us of the oil used on the day of our Baptisms, by which we were claimed and marked and sealed as Christ's own forever. Real health comes from remembering that this is who we *really* are—above all else—beyond all the titles and labels others give us or we give ourselves.

And so we pray for health tonight: in mind, body and soul—for ourselves and for others near and dear to us. We pray as well for healing in the Church, for healing of all that divides the Body of Christ from itself. We pray for healing in this nation—from our cities to our agricultural communities—between “blue” states and “red” states. We pray for the health and restoration of this good earth—for clean rivers and lakes and streams and oceans, that bring us to health, rather than to sickness. We pray for healing among the nations, and for peace on earth.

We pray, once again—as we prepare ourselves to go to Bethlehem:

Come Lord Jesus.

Deign to be our guest.

Come and be among us, and be present with us  
and through us.

Bring us to peace that passes all understanding,  
and to the health that only you can give.

In the name of your son, Jesus our Lord, we pray. Amen.

**The Rev. Richard M. Simpson**  
**Holden, Mass.**  
**December 22, 2004**