

A sermon preached at Zion, North Branford  
July 7, 2019  
Texts: 2 Kings 5:1-14, Luke 10:1-11, 16-20  
The Rev. Lucy D. LaRocca

The diagnosis was grim; leprosy. Life as he knew it was over. This was a highly contagious illness and affected sufferers in every aspect of their lives. Not just what we know as Hansen's disease today, in the days of our spiritual ancestors, leprosy was a blanket term that included many other skin ailments. But with a progressive disease with no cure, there was no taking any chances. In the book of Leviticus, it was decreed that those affected had to go to a priest for judgment, "the leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. His dwelling shall be outside the camp" And not just for the Hebrew people, all over the ancient near east, quarantine and banishment from society was commonplace for lepers.

So when Naaman, a mighty Syrian warrior was infected, he was desperate. The misery of leprosy affected him physically, socially, and vocationally. His reputation and standing as a commanding officer, his relationships, and his very life were all in danger. An unnamed servant girl, a captive from Israel told Naaman and his wife about Elisha, the mighty prophet.

What follows was a diplomatic nightmare. Naaman set out for Israel with a large entourage, gifts, and a letter of introduction from the king. The King of Israel interpreted the letter as a provocation from his rival. Elisha rescued the king from this embarrassment and agreed to treat Naaman. Although he didn't actually see him; he just sent a servant out to tell him to wash in the Jordan River seven times. But by now, Naaman had had enough. It was one thing to be brushed aside by the king, but this so-called prophet snubbed him as well. Being told to just 'Go wash in the river' didn't seem right either. Weren't the rivers in his own country good enough? Again, it was Naaman's servants who had the words of wisdom; they told him that he would have done something much more difficult to rid himself of leprosy, why not try the very simple thing that has been suggested. By doing so Naaman is made clean and whole once more. All is restored and renewed.

It is easy to see why this was one of Jesus' favorite Bible stories. It has many elements in it that reflect his character: it's scandalous, edgy, has unexpected twists, and is all about healing. Jesus referenced this story in Luke 4, when he confronted the people in his hometown who did not accept him. He tells them it is no wonder that Elisha did not heal any lepers in Israel, only Naaman -who was from Syria. So often in the stories Jesus told, it is foreigners and strangers who are lifted up as role models, and the insiders, the powerful, and the privileged who look like fools.

For Naaman to be healed, a number of things had to take place. Above all, he needed to humble himself. Again and again, in his own eyes and in the minds of those around him, he was an important man with a prestigious position. And yet in his illness, he was no more powerful than anyone else. He first had to listen to an unnamed, insignificant slave

girl from another country whom he himself was holding captive. He needed to be willing to travel a great distance from where he was. He needed to face being snubbed by a prophet, who didn't give him an audience, but sent a message through a servant. He had to accept being corrected by mere hirelings who chided him when he was upset with the simple solution he was given. He had to be content with and obedient to the remedy he was offered, though it seemed beneath him.

What about us? What healing do we seek? What do we see as a threat to our way of life? What do we long to have restored? Whether it is a personal ailment or a societal affliction, we would do well to heed the story of Naaman. With whom do we take counsel? Whose voices do we overlook? What solutions do we consider? Are we willing to move from our current position? And what do we dismiss as being too simple or beneath us?

God has not changed in the thousands of years between the time of Elisha and our time. Even now, it may be that it is the nameless foreigner in our midst who has the greatest gift to give us if we could only humble ourselves enough to accept it.

I have never been explicitly partisan in a sermon. I do mention current situations that touch on the gospel of Jesus. But the state of affairs at our borders and our current government's treatment of those seeking asylum needs to be addressed in the clearest way possible. As a clergy person, I am a mandated reporter. I am obligated by law to report on suspected situations of abuse or neglect of children or other vulnerable persons. I can be arrested and charged with a crime if I know of atrocities being committed and do not speak up. Beyond the law, I also consider this to be a moral obligation.

For the last few weeks we have heard the reports and seen photos of the conditions at the detention camps. Story after story tell of children as young as a few months old being separated from their parents, not given adequate food, clothing, diapers, medicine, or a place to rest. Some have died. Men and women are being held in pens so crowded that they cannot lie down. Bright lights are left on all the time, there is not enough water or food. We must not look away. We must listen to their stories.

In the kingdom of God, there is no us and them. We cannot be made whole, we cannot be restored, we cannot be healed of our disease if we continue to ignore the plight of the foreigner in our midst. I urge you to speak up on behalf of all the unnamed girls and boys held captive in our land. Jesus said there would be work for us to do to bring the Kingdom of heaven near. In today's gospel we heard him say "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Go on your way." May we have the courage to go on the way set before us. Amen.