

## Healing

Healing is the obvious topic from two of our scripture readings for today, but the other two also focus on this issue in a less direct way. All the texts from Jeremiah, 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy and Luke concern themselves with this concept of living well, expanding the theme from the specific narratives about physical healing in Luke and 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings. Jeremiah writes to the survivors of the sacking of Jerusalem and deportation to Babylon that God has spoken a word to them telling them God wants them to live well and build full lives even if they must live in a foreign land. This living well also looks like seeking and praying for the shalom, the peace and prosperity, of the city in which those who are exiled now find themselves living. God tells them their own shalom is now tied to the shalom of the city in which they now live. The author of 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy also writes about living well. Even imprisoned in chains, this letter's author seeks well-being not in worldly comforts but in the salvation that is in Jesus Christ. The writer knows that Timothy and his community also suffer and struggle, even if they are not in chains themselves. He urges them not to take pride in worldly status, but in truth. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings, a captive Israeli girl begins providing a way for a Syrian warrior to obtain healing of his skin disease which separates him from community and wholeness. Finally, in the miraculous healing story from the gospel of Luke, Jesus talks about two kinds of living well. First, Jesus makes ten men suffering from leprosy "clean." For Jews in the first century, being made clean meant the ability to participate fully in the life of the community. One had to be ritually clean to participate in communal activities from worship to the sharing of a meal at a table. By making them clean, Jesus not only restores their bodies from a debilitating and disfiguring disease, but Jesus also restores them to their community. In each passage we are told of people struggling and suffering: people in exile, people persecuted for their faith, people suffering from a terrible skin disease that excluded them from their community. And in each passage, God speaks a word of wholeness, a word of shalom and salvation which empowers those listening truly to live well. The passage read from 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings is one of the most familiar stories from 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings. It is the story of the healing of Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Aram by the prophet Elisha. Aram is known as Syria today and was a traditional enemy of Israel, as shown by the presence of the captive Israeli in Naaman's household. The story begins with what seems a routine report about an important person with an important problem. "Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram was a great man and in high favor with his master because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram over Israel. However, despite his might achievements on the battlefield, he has a major problem within the culture: he suffered from leprosy. That God gave this foreign commander victory over Israel might make it easy to assume Naaman worshiped the Lord, but he didn't. He worshiped Hadad, the god proclaimed in Aram. The convoluted context is that Aram was responsible for killing Israel's king Ahab who led Israel away from God and God's ways. Still, it is ironic that Naaman's healing should come through the agency of a young girl who served in his household—a young girl captured from the "land of Israel" and imprisoned during one of the Aramean raids on her home. But that is one of the characteristics of the God described in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. God works through the unexpected and in unexpected ways. Note the power differential in play here. On the one hand there is Naaman—"the great man" and "mighty warrior" favored

by the Lord with victory. On the other hand, there is a trafficked and enslaved young Israelite girl. There is a vast chasm in social power and standing between those two; rather like the differential between Egypt's pharaoh and the Hebrew midwives, between Jacob and Tamar, or Siserah and Jael—even between Pilate and Jesus. As is typical of the theology of the cross, the spirit of God stirs among the lowly and brings salvation from the bottom upward. This captive girl showed compassion for her enslaver—she informed her mistress, Naaman's wife that "the prophet who is in Samaria" could cure Naaman's leprosy. Naaman hearing this report decides to act on it, but instead of seeking out the prophet himself, he goes to his king to obtain the prophet's services. His thought is to seek to use his power with his king to obtain what he desires. This leprosy is so overwhelming it overshadows his life so he seeks his king's aid in this project. Aram's king wants to aid his army's commander so he writes a letter to Israel's king—power and privilege to power and privilege...saying to Israel's king "when this letter reaches you know that I have sent to you my servant, Naaman, that you might cure him of his leprosy." This letter was received in panic for Israel's king knew he did not have that power acknowledging that he was not God to give life and death in this matter. He fears Aram's king is seeking to pick a fight and in a panic begins tearing his clothes. Elisha hears of this uproar and tells the king to send Naaman to him. So Naaman travels on to Elisha's home with the things he has brought with him—a cavalcade of horses and chariots as well as carts carrying gold, silver to present after his cure. The culture of the time was based on a system of goods and services which were exchanged out of social relationships. He brought these gifts not for trade but out of obligation to maintain the proper relationship for the service he expected to receive. However, Naaman is not pleased with this arrangement; especially when he is halted at the entrance and told by Elisha's servant that he should go wash in the Jordan seven times and his flesh would be restored and he would be clean. Naaman is insulted that Elisha does not meet him personally and perform a ritual. Naaman has been directed away from the royal palace to the modest home of the prophet who then doesn't meet with him personally. Naaman angrily plans to return home without even trying this "cure" he has been given. Again, God works for Naaman's cure through his own servants who advise him to try it. He does, and the result is he is cleansed. Naaman receives more than a simple clearing of his skin, he then goes back to Elisha and proclaims "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel. He then offers all the gifts he has brought with him to Elisha but Elisha refuses them. Naaman then asks for two mule loads of dirt to take back to Aram with him so that he can worship God no longer being willing to make sacrifices or burnt offerings to other gods. He now offers thanks and praise to God for his cure. The real power in the story does not lie in royal courts, military prowess, political influence or great wealth which Elisha is offered but refuses. The power lies with the God Elisha serves and Naaman recognizes that. God has again turned worldly expectations upside down. The narrative of the healing from Luke's gospel is much shorter and has fewer steps leading to the healing but in this story Jesus speaks of two types of healing. It begins when Jesus is approached by ten men with leprosy calling out to him but keeping their distance because they are unclean. They address him as "master" and ask for mercy. Jesus performs no healing act but tells them to "Go and show themselves to the priests". They turn around to do as he has asked and discover as they go that they were made clean. All were cleaned, but only one of them when he saw that he was healed turned around and went back

to Jesus, praising God for his healing and prostrating himself at Jesus' feet. Jesus then asks the question why only one of the ten came back to give praise to God for their healing. And then the unexpected detail is revealed that this one who came back was a Samaritan, not a Jew. This is not the first time that the Samaritan in the story has exhibited the behavior expected of someone obedient and following God's ways while those whose behavior should reflect that have not. Samaritans were the unlovely outsiders of Jesus' day. These unappealingly different and unwelcome outsiders, along with other outsiders generally are received positively by Jesus in Luke's narrative. This is most notable in the parable of the Good Samaritan whose demonstrates love for his neighbor by showing mercy to a wounded stranger when the respectable religious people pass by. The Samaritan's thanksgiving and prostration at Jesus' feet show his recognition that God is at work when Jesus notices and heal hurts and brokenness that are not noticed by the others. His understanding is that to thank Jesus is to glorify God: this is the manifestation of faith that makes well the blessing given when he is told to get up and go on his way. This parable begins with Jesus in a "border" region. Actually since Israel and Samaria share a border, there is no region between them physically but he is crossing boundaries and wandering where he probably shouldn't go as a Jewish teacher. These people encountered at boundaries are living here are ones on the margins, who are treated as invisible or unlovely because of who they are or where they come from, or perhaps how they look. Jesus clearly notices and loves them and calls us to do the same. Jesus has instructed all ten to go and show themselves to the priests promising by implication that they will be made well. And indeed, as they travel they are made well, cleansed of their infirmity. But only one has noticed and turned back to express his gratitude with a posture of worship to give thanks. There are two things to notice here. First the nine who did not return did not actually do anything wrong as they obeyed Jesus' instructions. They did nothing wrong and received the blessing of clean skin promised them. Second, the one who turns back, however is identified by Jesus, recognized and affirmed that he not only saw that he was healed but returned to give thanks for it, and was then blessed a second time. He had received healing like the others, but now Jesus concluded his exchange with the man by sending him on his way by saying that his faith has made him not only physically well, but also whole and, indeed, saved. This man has not only received the blessing of healing from the leprosy but has also received the blessing that comes from recognizing be blessed and giving thanks. That thanksgiving springs from perception—our ability to recognize blessing—and articulation –giving expression , no matter how inadequate it might seem at the time of our gratitude for that blessing. And every time these two are combined—seeing and saying—giving thanks actually grants a second blessing. Gratitude in many ways is the noblest of emotions as it draws us out of ourselves into something larger, bigger and grander than we could imagine and joins us to the font of the blessing itself. It frees us from fear, releases us from anxiety, and emboldens us to do more and dare more than we'd ever imagine. Those nine lepers did nothing wrong but they missed out because they didn't see their good fortune and didn't voice their blessing, and so missed out on being made whole. The world is full of blessings and challenges. We have a choice about on which we focus. Gratitude is indeed a response to the blessings of life, but it is also a choice to see those blessings, name them, and express gratitude for them in word and deed. And giving voice to gratitude is a choice with consequences because as we express our gratitude we affect

those around us, and even shape the reality of the world in which we live. Think about it, Gratitude is not the only emotion we might choose to express in response to the events of any given day. There are also reasons for fear, for anger, for frustration, for grief, for regret, for apprehension. Each and all of these emotions color our lives and experiences. Each will make its presence felt at some time in our lives. But we choose how much stage time to give each of them by giving them expression. How much we choose to express each one determines the power we give to them to affect our lives. And that's what's key. We are making choices and like giving our trust to God is like a muscle that strengthens our faith, choosing to express our gratitude is also like a muscle. The more we see and express our gratitude for our blessings, the more that is our choice, it becomes more easily to us and draws us close to being whole and having God's shalom in our lives. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.