

MADE WELL

2 Kings 5:1-15

Luke 17:11-19

TEXT: Luke 17:19 “Then Jesus said to him, ‘Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.’”

PURPOSE: To invite us to experience the wellness which is God’s desire for us, which we receive through faith.

David B. Keller

October 13, 2019

“You’ll need a pre-op physical before we can do your surgery.” “Your EKG revealed a cardiac anomaly; you need to undergo a stress test.” “Take one of these pills three times a day for the rest of your life.” “Take one of these pills an hour before or after you eat for two weeks, then come back and see me and we’ll decide what to do next.” “We’re going to prescribe a six week course of chemotherapy, followed by a fifteen week course of radiation therapy.” “Your insurance doesn’t cover the treatment we think is best for what you have.” “You’ll need to go to Boston to get the help your child needs.” “Your wife’s dementia is only going to get worse. You really need to be making plans for her to live in a memory care unit.”

Hearing things like this is bad enough when we hear them in a doctor’s office. I suspect no one here this morning is happy to also be hearing them in church. For those of us who have been told such things, doesn’t it sometimes seem as if the appointments, the tests, the drugs, and the treatments, even if they’re curing what ails us, leave us feeling a lot less well? Here in worship, the important question about all this is, what is God’s involvement in the health crises we face? I propose an answer, based on the two stories of healing we heard today: God’s interest is in making us well. And God can make us well whether or not we are cured of whatever ails us.

The story of the healing of Naaman, found in the Second Book of Kings, is totally fascinating. Naaman was the commander of the army of a country which was at war with Israel. Even though he was a bigwig, he suffered from some sort of skin disease. Our English translations use the word ‘leprosy’ to translate a word which refers to a wide variety of diseases of the skin. Maybe Naaman had one of the conditions for which TV ads for cures are currently flooding the airwaves with scenes of happy people showing off unblemished skin. But there was no help for Naaman in his home country. There was, however, a young Israelite woman who had been captured in one of Aram’s raids on Israel who was a slave serving Naaman’s wife. Rather than secretly gloating over the general’s disease, she told him about a prophet in her home country who could cure him. He decided to go, with the blessing of his king, who sent a note to the king of Israel. This would be like a general in the Turkish army seeking medical assistance from a Kurd. Outrageous for the general, and terrifying for the Kurds. But such are the lengths we will go to pursue the prospect of a cure.

In Israel, Naaman's request for a cure terrified the king, but didn't ruffle the feathers of the prophet Elisha. When Naaman came to him, Elisha demonstrated the worst bedside manner ever. Rather than seeing Naaman in person, he sent a messenger who instructed the general to wash seven times in the Jordan. Naaman thought it was a ridiculous prescription, but after complaining about Elisha's disrespecting him, he did as he was told, and consequently, his skin was cleansed. He was not only cured; he was made well, well in the sense of realizing the involvement of Elisha's God in his healing. "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel," he declared. If you continue reading the story, you'll discover that from then on, he would worship no other god save Israel's God.

The distinction between curing and being made well is made specific in the gospel story of Jesus healing ten lepers. Keep in mind that people who suffered from skin diseases in Jesus' day were socially ostracized. They were ritually unclean. They had to live in colonies away from the general population. They had to rely on people's charity to meet their basic needs. This particular group of lepers included at least one Samaritan, people who were loathed by Jews as religious heretics. For that group of lepers, the bond of their common illness was more significant than cultural and religious differences.

When the lepers cried out to Jesus to have mercy on them, he told them to go and show themselves to the priests. His bedside manner was almost more cavalier than that of Elisha with Naaman. One of the responsibilities of a priest was to certify that a person was cleansed of skin diseases. But Jesus sent the lepers before they were made clean. As with Naaman taking seven baths in the Jordan, it was in their obedience that they were cleansed. Nine of the former lepers kept going to the priests. One of them, a Samaritan, broke ranks and went back to Jesus, praising God and thanking Jesus. In response, Jesus told him that his faith had "made him well."

What's being made well? Start with this: just as peace is not the same as the lack of conflict, so wellness is not the same as the lack of disease. I have had the great privilege of being pastor to quite a few people who were well in spite of still having some sort of disease or disability. One of them is a woman named Ruth. Ruth was a long time member of a church I once served. By the time I came to that church, she was not so much serving on boards as she was a spiritual leader, a woman whose insight was greatly respected. Like many older people, Ruth's knees were in pretty poor shape. When the time was right, she had one of those troublesome joints replaced. While she was recuperating in a rehab unit, she fell and significantly

damaged the repaired knee. It got infected, and she spent many weeks in a nursing home on continuous IV antibiotics. But her knee did not heal. The doctors gave her a choice: either fuse the joint, or amputate her leg. She chose the fusion, which meant she got to keep her leg, but could no longer bend it at the knee.

From the initial surgery until she was settled in an assisted living facility was a period of many months. Ruth would be the first to admit that the ordeal severely tested her faith. It was especially difficult during the time when we all were hoping that the antibiotics would do their job and allow her to have a second surgery. But along the way, I began to notice how Ruth was getting well even though she was not getting cured. The most obvious sign was her shift in focus, away from herself and outward toward concern for our church and the world. More subtly, a peace came over her, not a mere acceptance of her handicap, but something much more vital, much more life-affirming. Once she was discharged from care, she found ways to be actively engaged in her community and her church. Ruth was made well, unquestionably by her faith, faith that God still had a purpose for her, faith that God was blessing her, even though her disability remained. And like the healed Samaritan leper, her faith was expressed in gratitude. As she was before all this took place, she continued to be one of the most grateful people I've ever had the privilege to pastor.

Our opening song this morning is cast as a prayer to Jesus: We sang that we've come, Christ, to pray for health, to plead for friends.¹ So we do, in this church, Sunday after Sunday. So many of the prayers we lift up here are for healing, from illness of body, mind, or spirit, relief from grief, relief from anxiety. The hymn acknowledges that our bodies clamor to be freed from every ailment, yet also affirms that our deepest need is for wholeness. Wholeness, like wellness, is the gift of faith made visible in gratitude. The hymn recognizes that personal, social, and global conflicts literally makes us sick. Undoubtedly they do. I recall coming down with a stubborn six month bronchitis that kept me from sleeping during a time when I was embroiled in a conflict with the leaders of a church I was serving. And these days, the troubles overwhelming our world often leave me wallowing in despair and cynicism, sicknesses themselves, but triggers for other illnesses of the mind or the soul.

Finally, though, the hymn asks Jesus to grant that we experience his gift of wholeness in the community of faith, and that we share this gift with the whole of humankind. That's where true wellness is found: in community. The reflection in

¹"O Christ, the Healer, We Have Come." Words, Fred Pratt Green. In *Worship and Rejoice* hymnal, Hope Publishing, p. 638.

today's bulletin, from wise Wendell Berry, insists that healing is impossible in loneliness. I'll take this a step further to say that wellness is only fully experienced in community. Ruth was made well in a community which loved her, stayed with her, and affirmed her as a person with much to offer.

This past Wednesday, a small group met in the Friendship House to hear a nurse practitioner named Renee Plodznick speak about a program called Cancer Survivorship. I regret that I wasn't able to stay for the entire presentation. I have to say, though, that the programs that have been happening in our Friendship House have been outstanding. We can be grateful for what is being offered, and for the way it is making real our vision of becoming a resource for healthy community life in Newbury.

Cancer Survivorship is a plan for living after the active treatment phase of living with cancer. It involves cultivating a way of life that enables cancer survivors to live well. Wellness, as any cancer survivor will tell us, is so much more than completing treatment. It is a life that will not be defined by a diagnosis. After treatment, people who have been diagnosed with cancer generally are thought not to be 'cured,' but rather, that their cancer is 'in remission,' at least for five years. But people diagnosed with cancer can be well even if they haven't been cured. It turns out that Renee herself is a cancer survivor, and in the brief time it was my privilege to be in her presence, I knew her to be a person who had been made well. Her disease had deepened her compassion, her desire to be of service to others, and her compassion communicated her wellness.

So yes, there are those pills to take, those appointments to make, those procedures to undergo. The way to wellness involves following instructions, like Naaman bathing in the Jordan, like the lepers going to the priests while they still had their disease. We won't get better if we don't follow instructions. But we get well when we recognize God's hand in our healing, when faith overtakes fear and moves us to gratitude, and finally, when our experience turns us in compassion toward a world in need of the wholeness which only God can accomplish.

Maybe we will be cured of what ails us; maybe we won't. What I know for sure is that God wants us to be made well. What I believe is that God offers a way to wellness for every one of God's children, and indeed, that God wants the whole world to be well. That's what it means for God's kingdom to come, for God's realm to be our reality.