

6th Sunday of Epiphany

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Two of our stories today have to do with men with leprosy, a skin infection that is just nasty in many ways.

Since the time of Moses, people who contracted the disease were outcast and quarantined for fear of contamination. For a leper, touching someone else was forbidden. Leviticus tells us that *“The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled, and shall cover his upper lip and cry out ‘unclean, unclean’... he shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.”* (Leviticus 13:45-46)

Not a pretty existence. Not something you’d wish on someone else, let alone want to be in yourself. If you heard there was a cure, an escape from this life of torturous existence, you’d take it in a heartbeat!

The story comes early in the ministry of Jesus, but he was gaining quite a reputation already. His preaching in the synagogue amazed and astonished the religious faithful and scared the unclean spirits into convulsing cries for mercy.

People brought to him their friends who were sick and possessed and gave glory to God as they brought them home healthy, clean and whole. Mark tells us that *“his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.”* (Mark 1:28)

Elisha had a similar reputation.

Israel’s prophet was known for the miraculous, bringing the blessings and curses of God. But his story focuses more on a commander of a pagan army. Naaman was powerful (*ōa* great man*ö*) and popular (*ōin* high favor*ö*). He was a man of influence who was used to getting what he wanted.

Yet, he was desperate. His leprosy meant the end of his career, the end of his relationships, the end of his influence. He *had* to do something.

We don’t know much about the Leper who came to Jesus. Only that he did so in a posture of humility *ō* begging and kneeling before Jesus, saying *“if you choose, you can make me clean.”*

Naaman was skeptical and proud. He sent his servants to find the prophet in hopes of a cure. Yet, when the prophet proscribes the cure, the commander didn’t agree with the prescription *ō* it made him angry and stormed off thinking that he knew better *í* that *he* knew how God should act. So maybe he wasn’t desperate enough. Until his servant talked some sense into him and sent him back to the prophet.

Both the Man of God and the Son of God were able to dispense the cure.

Both were on a mission to bring the rule of God into the lives of humankind. That was the focus of their lives. That was a purpose that drove them to do the things they did. They were willing to take great risks *ō* going into enemy territory! Touching a leper! But to them, the mission was worth it.

“Moved with pity (compassion, righteous indignation), Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I do choose. Be made clean!’”

And immediately, the leprosy left the man and he was made clean.

It took a little more for poor Naaman. He had to step into the muddy waters of the Jordan River and dunked himself, not once, not twice, but seven times before he was restored. But he got the message. After he dragged himself up from the banks of the river, in front of all his friends, he stood before Elisha and declared, *“Now I know there is no God in all the earth except in Israel”*. (II Kings 5:15b)

The story of Jesus and the leper takes a strange turn after the man is healed.

Although he came to Jesus in humility and with respect, he let his emotions get the best of him and totally disregarded the request that Jesus gave him. More than a request, Mark calls it a *“stern warning”*.

The results of this man’s disobedience thwarted Jesus’s efforts to be about what God sent him to do.

Last week in the Gospel reading from an earlier paragraph in Mark (1:35-39), we heard Jesus tell Simon and his buddies that his purpose (mission) was to proclaim the message in neighboring townsí most likely going to the synagogues to teach and preach the good news about God’s redeeming love.

Now, as a result of one man choosing to ignore Jesus’s warning, he was no longer able to go into towns openly and people would be coming to Jesus for the medicine he gave, not the message he taught.

Jesus had his eyes fixed on the missioní on what God had sent him to do. But in his excitement, this newly healed former-leper let his personal interests get in the way of the mission. Just like Naaman thinking that he had a better idea than the prophet of God on how to go about things, this man (and we don’t even know his name) took matters into his own hands and did things his own way.

The Church in Corinth had a similar problem.

They took their new found freedom in Christ to all kinds of perverted extremes. Their liberty from the law and their õrightsö became the principal point of their spirituality. And the message was getting lost.

The church was becoming known for their loose morality and self-serving preoccupations. And Paul was calling them on it.

Talk about a guy focused on the mission of Christ!

Paul would tell the Corinthians that *“Everything I do is for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessing”* (I Cor. 9:23).

The õblessing of the gospelö was to see people experience the freedom and forgiveness that comes from a life regenerated by the Spirit. To see those who were suffering whole again. That sharpened Paul’s focus. That defined his purpose.

And he encourages the church at Corinth to do the same. To *“run the race”* with him in such a way that they will win.

Paul knows what it takes to do that. Just like an athlete has to be dedicated, who has to be purposeful and disciplinedí who, just like a runner has to persevere through setbacks and difficultiesí so must the church in order to share in the blessings of the Gospel. He wants them to be in it to win it!

What Paul is NOT saying is that we can miss out or be disqualified from salvation – that somehow we can fall out of the grace of God. God is always gracious and there is no limit to his grace (we’re Lutherans, we know that!). But we can miss out on the blessings of being a part of the mission.

If the athlete metaphor isn’t working for you, earlier in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul uses the image of a builder. He writes “*According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder... I laid a foundation, someone else is building on it, and if what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward.*” (I Cor. 3:10-14)

Paul is trying to get the Corinthians to see that it is not about *their* rights or liberties. There is something much greater! God’s got so much more for them.

There are plenty of things that distract us from the mission of Christ, which is the mission of the church.

Like Naaman, our own status or position can lead to pride – where we get to the point where we don’t listen to others because, after all, *we* are right.

Like the Leper, our own interests and enthusiasm for our own experience (“*woo-pee! Look at me! I’m healed!*” Or “*look at us, we’re growing*”), takes our attention off of what Jesus is asking us to do, or not do, we get self-absorbed in our accomplishments.

Our, like the Corinthian church, we allow a sense of entitlement to grow and our time, our talents and our treasures become something we only spend on ourselves. “*After all we earned it!*” “*We should be able to do what we want when we want.*”

Athletes pursue a goal. They are in it to win it. That is the way it was with Jesus. That is what Paul calls us to, as followers to Jesus.

But the reward isn’t a trophy that collects dust or medals that tarnish. It is something that lasts for eternity. Something far beyond value.

Peace Lutheran Church has a goal. We say that “We are called by God to serve and proclaim his Word.” That’s our mission. And we are in it to win it! To win the prize that is the blessing of bringing others to Christ and the reward of a life of forgiveness and freedom.

It does take some work and sacrifice. It will take purposefulness and perseverance. And it will take doing it together as a team called the “Body of Christ.” Because that is the only way we will accomplish our God-given call to be the people of God who serve and proclaim Him.

For “*we are called to be light for the Kingdom of God... to act with justice, to love tenderly, to serve one another, and to walk humbly with God.*”

Only by doing that will we be winners.

Amen.