

The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)

Rev. Anita R. Warner

Advent Lutheran Church, Morgan Hill, CA

February 15, 2009

Texts: 2 Kings 5:1-14; Mark 1:40-45

## LEARNING TO ASK

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. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

2 Kings 5:1-14 (NRSV)

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

Mark 1:40-45 (NRSV)

In this season of Epiphany, of God's light being revealed, I have to ask you all:  
How many church members does it take to change a light bulb?

If you're Charismatic: Only one. Hands are already in the air.

If you're Pentecostal: Ten. One to change the bulb, and nine to pray against the spirit of darkness.

If you're Presbyterian: None. Lights will go on and off at predestined times.

If you're Roman Catholic: None. Candles only.

If you're Baptist: At least fifteen. One to change the light bulb, and three committees to approve the change and decide who brings the potato salad and fried chicken.

If you're Episcopalian: Three. One to call the electrician, one to mix the drinks and one to talk about how much better the old one was.

If you're Unitarian: We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a light bulb. However, if in your own journey you have found that light bulbs work for you, that is fine. You are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your light bulb for the next Sunday service, in which we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, three-way, long-life and tinted, all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence.

If you're Methodist: Undetermined. Whether your light is bright, dull, or completely out, you are loved. You can be a light bulb, turnip bulb, or tulip bulb. Church wide lighting service is planned for Sunday. Bring bulb of your choice and a covered dish.

If you're Nazarene: Six. One woman to replace the bulb while five men review church lighting policy.

If you're Amish: What's a light bulb?

If you're Lutheran: None. Lutherans don't believe in change.

I did not make this up. The joke goes, Lutherans don't like change. If the Lutheran church we once knew didn't include people praying directly for one another's healing, then we may not be comfortable with it now and not want it...

But it has not always been the case that Lutherans might not pray directly for each other's healing. The story is told of Martin Luther, who heard that his fellow reformer, Philip Melancthon was dying, and at once went to see him. "[Philip's] eyes were dim, his understanding almost gone, his tongue faltering, his hearing closed, his countenance fallen and hollow; he knew nobody; he could eat and drink

nothing At the sight of him Luther became alarmed, and turning to those present, he exclaimed, “for I threw my sack before [God’s] door, and wearied his ears with all promises of hearing prayers.” After this he seized Phillip’s hand, “Be of good courage, Philip, you shall not die. God has reason to slay but he willeth not the death of a sinner, but that he should be converted and live. God received into his favor the greatest sinners that ever lived on earth, Adam and Eve, and he will not reject you, Philip, or let you perish in sin and despair. Do not succumb to this dejection and murder yourself, but trust in the Lord, who can slay and make alive again, can wound and bind up, can smite and heal again.” Luther knew well the burden on Philip’s heart and conscience. Thus addressed, Philiip began to stir, but for a long while could say nothing. At last he turned straight toward Luther and began to bet him for God’s sake not to detain him any longer, that he was now on a good journey – that he should let him go – that nothing better could befall him. “By no means, Philip,” said Luther; “you must serve our Lord God yet longer.” Thus Philip by degrees became more cheerful, and let Luther order him something to eat; and Luther brought it himself to him but Philip refused it. Then Luther forced him with threats, “Philip, you must eat, or I excommunicate you.” With these words he was overcome so that he ate a very little; and thus gradually he gained strength again.”

*Corpus Reformatorum*, 3:xvii

Mark describes a person with leprosy coming to Jesus for healing early in his ministry (Mark 1:40-45). Leprosy was a disease that isolated people. “The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." he shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.” [Leviticus 13:45-46, NRSV]

Leprosy is not the only disease that isolates people. I suggest that people almost always find illness isolating – and that is part of the dis-ease that comes with not being well. Whether you suffer from a contagious illness, or a bad back, depression or another mental illness, relationship problems, or diabetes, illness can contribute toward feelings of loneliness.

"Faith" is not mentioned in the healing of the leper in Mark. Yet, can we not say that the leper's approach to Jesus -- his disregard for the social and ritual rules -- his belief that Jesus had the power and authority to cleanse him or declare him clean, if Jesus should want to do so -- are actions of faith?

Desiring to be healed or made whole is good and deeply human. Mark tells us that Jesus showed strong emotion around the man’s leprosy and the isolation it caused him. Healing was always a part of Jesus’ ministry – people came to him from every quarter, Mark writes in his gospel. Jesus announced the kingdom of God and then, in his healings and deeds of power, showed what the kingdom looked like.

I've often wondered how the church in some quarters has forgotten that the ministry of healing has always been an important part of the ministry of the gospel. We pray for others every Sunday, yes, in the prayers of the church. But often we assembled in the congregation are reluctant to ask for prayers for our own healing.

There are many reasons for this, I suppose. Some of us are well-practiced in saying to others and even to ourselves that we are "fine" even when we are not. Or you may be modest and think that prayer ought to be for those who are really very ill and not for the smaller things that afflict you, like a headache.

You may worry about what may happen – or may not happen – if you take the step of allowing someone else to pray for you in Jesus' name. It is tough for some of us to be vulnerable and humble enough to ask another person to pray for us. What will they do? Will we be embarrassed? Can we trust ourselves with the very human prayer minister who is offering to pray with us?

Naaman, the great commander of the Syrians, had that problem, too, but he was desperate to have his leprosy cured, and so he came - with his gifts and stallions and chariot to the house of Elisha the prophet. Only Elisha wasn't impressed; once one has seen a fiery chariot and horses going up to heaven, I suppose one isn't impressed even with mighty Naaman's chariot and horses. Nor did Elisha do what Naaman wanted, which was coming out and affecting a miraculous cure. No, Elisha didn't come out at all, but sent a messenger to him to tell him to wash in the Jordan seven times.

This was a stretch for mighty Naaman, to be sure. The Jordan was not a mighty river but more like a stream or a creek – think Coyote Creek. Even getting his whole self into it and immersed might be embarrassing – he would have to rather awkwardly lower his body into this shallow stream. It would require humility for sure. Think about if you were an important person asking for a ritual healing; wouldn't you choose the location of the mighty Pacific over Coyote Creek? So, when Elisha sent a messenger to tell Naaman to wash in the Jordan not once but *seven times*, Naaman was angry! But his cooler-headed servants reasoned with him that he didn't have anything to lose – then he finally did as Elisha asked, and was restored to health.

When you come before God for healing in your life today, I don't think anyone will send you to Coyote Creek. But you may be nudged by the Holy Spirit to let down your guard and to actually ask for God to heal you. You may be moved to do this alone, or with others. It is hard for some of us to ask others to do anything for us, but God made us in the church to need one another. When you ask prayer ministers to pray for you, you may be as vague or specific as you like. We have a norm with our prayer ministers that when they pray for someone, they do not talk

with anyone else about what you have asked them to pray for. They simply stand with you and lift it to God with you, trusting the promise that where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, he is here among us. The prayer ministers are people who offer themselves as conduits for God's healing that is not in our control but is available for us when we humble ourselves and ask. We ask God' presence here and pray for one another here, so that we all might be emboldened to pray for one another in our homes and in the streets, to offer ourselves as conduits of God's healing power.

We trust, as Jesus did, that God desires our wholeness. Some Christians work in the vocations of promoting healing and health, and I believe that God works through medical care and those who give themselves to healing in those ways. And, in conjunction with medical care, God works through our giving ourselves over to God's healing for us through prayer. What if we ask someone to pray for us and nothing happens? I believe that there is always healing. There is not always a cure, but there is always healing. We can trust in God's mighty power to heal. For while we may be fearful, God is all love and is bringing the kingdom among us here, today, even as we await the fullness of God's kingdom to be revealed.