

THE OLD MEETING HOUSE
EAST MONTPELIER CENTER, VT

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“I do”

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There is no shortage of irony in the fact that this passage arrives on my homiletic plate right now, as I am still in the throes of recovering from the norovirus. The last time I preached on this text was for a class in school, 5 years ago now. This passage had been hand selected for me by my preaching professor. He was a certain form of sadist – as many professors are – and had wanted to find the most difficult texts for us to wrestle with.

I liked Naaman, and wasn't entirely sure why this passage was so difficult. It had many layers, of course – Elisha refusing to come to greet him, the beautiful faith of a young slave girl, the righteous indignation of the proud. Mostly, however, I just liked the image of a general, stripped of all his earthly trappings, naked and vulnerable, lowering himself into the water – the dirty, silt-y, fast-flowing waters of the Jordan – not once, or even twice, but seven times.

Think about seeing the most prestigious doctor at Dartmouth medical, who tells you the thing to do is to go down to the high school, to leave the trail and wade straight into the Winooski.

Picture the waters slide in around him. The first three dips are perfunctory – plugging his nose and hopping up and down. But the fourth, and fifth – they were too close to the number seven. They were slow, gentle – hopeful and fearful all at the same time. Coming up out of the water the sixth time, looking down at his arms, or his stomach, feeling the contours of his face, seeing no change – stripped of all his earthly pretense, no entourage, no camels and gold, what did he feel? Shame? Desperation? Sorrowful – knowing that, stripped of all these things, he was simply one sick man, without recourse for his suffering? Humiliation – thinking that he had been lowered into an Israelite's practical joke? My guess is all of these, coupled with that almost nauseating feeling of desperate hope – in the pit of his stomach, sliding over him, washing over him just like the waters, as they closed over his head for that seventh time. Should he rise back up and see? Or simply let the current take him?

My young, naïve, preacherly, self, thought the image was too vivid, too vibrant, too real to be difficult to preach. If it still spoke so clearly – wasn't the passage simply doing the preaching for me? Well, just as Elisha stripped away the pretenses of the General – refusing to come out to meet him, so too this passage refused to come out to meet me.

It was two days after a surgery to remove several cancerous skin patches, the largest of which was from my chest, right up the length of the sternum. Blonde-haired, German engineering at its finest. It was a minor surgery, certainly not the first time, nor the last I had it done, and I generally felt fine – except for when I lifted things. And so I went to class that Thursday, dressed in my Sunday finest, ascended those curved steps up to the Memorial Church pulpit, and settled into the space, saying the prayer I just said with you all, with the enormous sounding board looming ominously above me.

Holding the Bible in front of me, I began to read, “*Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor....*” It began to burn. “*If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him....*” The weight of it, the physical weight of the scriptures I was reading began to tear at the fresh sutures. “*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,*” me. The Bible, held straight out in front of me, was pulling apart my fresh wounds, and as Naaman sank once, then twice, then seven times, each one of the pock marks on my skin began to burn. By the time I had finished reading the text, I had a searing pain straight through my core. I could not preach what I had written.

See, I am an academic at heart. I am lucky there are not corduroy patches on my preaching robe. I use this excuse a lot to explain the tornado-like state of my office and my apartment, and my car.. and, well, virtually any other space I have ever inhabited. When there is an aspect of a text that is difficult to preach, usually I find some significant translation error that can be mined for some understanding of the gap between then and now. And, indeed, there are several in these texts, and this was the route I had intended to go. For example, Leprosy is generally accepted to not be the disease mentioned throughout the bible, simply a guesstimate provided by the translators of the King James Bible. It could mean any kind of skin ailment – from acne to psoriasis. And being healed biblically was often less about physical healing and more about re-acceptance into full participation in the social order.

This is certainly true for today’s Markan passage, where the leper asks not to be made well, or to be healed, but to be made clean. This preaches quite easily, as does a condemnation of Naaman, the arrogant commander, in search of an easy answer – or an answer worthy of his standing.

And yet, the psychologist and priest Eugene Kennedy writes in his book, *On Being a Friend*, that, “Death is by no means separate from life... We all interact with death every day, tasting it as we might a wine, feeling its keen edge even in trifling losses and disappointments, holding it by the hand as a dancer might a partner, in every separation. We pump the soul into every mystery from within, from inside our own experience.”

And that, that, is the question of these texts, is it not? One does not have to be gravely ill to see it. We feel death’s keen edge even in trifling losses. For some of us it’s the anxiety of a busy day. The fear we are not good enough... it is the weight of depression holding us under, and with each ripple of the river Jordan over our skin, we feel death closing in on us. With each resurfacing, the pock marks of death still

cling to our skin, exposed for all the world to see as we sit in one of those ridiculous, open-backed, blue paper johnnies. Instead of condemning Naaman, I knew I *was* him.

Who among us has not demanded of God “If you choose, you can make me clean,”? Indeed, when we hold up the words of scripture they must speak directly to this keen edge of death nestled directly on our hearts. And this, I suddenly knew, with the sounding board of that ancient pulpit looming above me like a gavel, was the secret of the text: does God choose?

In 1820, Thomas Jefferson took a razor to his New Testament. In a letter to Adams he wrote, “We must dismiss the [...] essences and emanations, [the] daemons, male and female, with a long train of ... or, shall I say at once, of nonsense. [...] I have performed this operation for my own use, by cutting verse by verse out of the printed book, and arranging the matter which is evidently his, and which is as easily distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill.”

You can bet the leper, begging Jesus to choose him, did not make it. Not a single miracle made the cut.

But what good is a gospel that cannot speak to the ache in your chest? What good is a gospel that cannot sew sutures back together, much less families, or communities, or nations?

Modern Americans are not alone in their skepticism of the Bible. And yet, having sat at the hospital bedside of so many, I would argue that the very thing we claim as absurd about these texts – a miracle-working healer – is, in fact, the very thing we crave the most. Reaching out to Jesus with our brokenness, we whisper to God, “If you choose....”

The reassurance of these texts is that, of course, God *does* choose. Just not, perhaps, in the ways we want – or even the ways we could possibly imagine. For Naaman – a man so prestigious that society overlooked his disease – it meant stripping himself down to the place where he was no different from his young slave girl – lowering herself into the river Jordan to bathe. It meant begging from his enemy for mercy. Like Naaman, don’t we want God to simply wave a magic wand? Instead, it seems, the way into life that God offers looks less like magic, and a lot more like love.

Each one of these healings reveals that the kingdom of God is coming near – and that in that place there is no room for sickness, disease, or isolation. With Naaman, we see that there is not place for war in God’s realm. But the way to this kingdom is not easy.

Unfortunately, in the bible, love looks less like cupid than it does a cross.

And I imagine it is for this reason that even Jesus himself seems wary of these miracles. “See that you say nothing to anyone,” he instructs the gleefully disobedient leper.

Contemporary preacher Fred Craddock has been known to say that miracles “create audiences, not congregations.” Indeed, due to this leper’s word, thousands flocked to Jesus for healing. And yet we know, for a fact, that when he hung on the cross, he was virtually alone.

In order for Jesus to say “yes” – to the leper – and to us, it meant he had to be willing to become unclean. *Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him.*

Craddock continues, “all the way to the cross, Jesus will be trying to get those who think ‘where the messiah is, there is no misery’ to accept a new perspective—‘where there is misery, there is the messiah.’”

Where there is misery, there is the messiah.

In 2009, there was an episode of *All Things Considered* that interviewed a man name Jose Ramirez, who had recently published a book about what it was like to live with leprosy – or Hansen’s disease. In it, he recounts a tale of coming back to his hometown in Laredo, Texas, after having been quarantined. Learning how contagious he was, he took out a plate and a bowl and a cup from the cupboard, and a roll of scotch tape. Very precisely he labeled each utensil with his name. No one in his family would make the mistake of eating from the same plate.

Here his voice catches. His mother, coming into the kitchen, becomes irate. She took the plate and smashed it against the counter. “Not in this house!” she cried out.

How many of us, when facing a difficult situation, are willing to say, “God, if you choose,” only to find out that, like this mother, that we are not, in fact, the leper, but Jesus? How many of us, when we ask, “God, if you choose,” are willing to hear that, just perhaps, we are not the leper, but Naaman, who must die to his pride, to his sense of entitlement, to his enemies, in order to once again see himself as whole? To heal a rift between nations?

In the Bible, love looks less like cupid than it does a cross.

Perhaps what Eugene Kennedy meant to say was that, each day, we taste this *love* “as we might a wine, feeling its keen edge even in trifling losses and disappointments, holding it by the hand as a dancer might a partner, in every separation.”

Think about the little deaths you have experience this week. What clue might they hold for your own healing? For the world’s? What, like Naaman, still needs to die in order for something new and bold and better to be born?

Where have you been afraid to go? What waters won’t you lower yourself into? Who do you refuse to touch?

Or, perhaps more importantly, when you last asked, “God, if you choose,” – who was it that responded, “I do choose,”?

And on this valentine’s week, where in the world is God calling you to say those very words yourself?