



Sermons from

“God’s People”

The Rev. Evans L McGowan

February 12th, 2012

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

2 Kings 5:1-14

Mark 1:40-45

“Being a Christian is less about cautiously avoiding sin than about courageously and actively doing God's will.” — [Dietrich Bonhoeffer](#)]

[Show clip from “Motorcycle Diaries” of Che wanting to celebrate his birthday with the leper colony across the river. He jumps in and swims across, risking his life to be with his friends.]

Like Che, I too have stood at the edge and thought about jumping in. I was on the shores of Lake Victoria in Tanzania with some friends as the sun slowly sank over the water. Sammy, a good Kenyan friend who does emergency relief work throughout East Africa was with me, as well as Dale, an ordained American missionary who establishes churches and clinics on the various islands in the lake. As we sat soaking in the last rays of sunshine on the shores of this massive lake, second in size only to Lake Superior and a good deal warmer, they asked me what I was planning to do next, after my volunteer missionary year was over. I told them I would probably go to seminary and be a minister.

“*Don't do that!*” Surprised, I asked, “Well, why not?” “You’ll be swallowed whole by the church! See this massive lake here,” I looked out at where my friend Sammy gestured. “The church is more massive than this and will swallow you alive.” The American pastor Dale chimed in, “Sammy’s right. The church has become an institution with all these laws and traditions that will suffocate the life out of you. The people who try to serve the church end up getting caught up in it... and then spit out.”

Now, nearly six years later, with a Masters of Divinity under my belt and six months into an ordained job, their words still haunt me, especially on those days when the bureaucracy gets to be too much, the meetings too long and the demands too tiresome... and I am frustrated with the church as an institution. [Show picture of little girl pushing up against a huge boulder.] It’s like pushing up against a boulder that just won’t budge. Do you ever get this feeling?

The lepers in 2 Kings and Mark struggle to trust God despite the religious rules and regulations that keep them ostracized from society. After all, it’s those following the law and tradition that are swallowing

them up and spitting them out, defining them as unclean and - at some level - unworthy of God's grace. And where there is swallowing and spitting out, there is rejection, frustration... and anger.

Naaman is angry. He is the great warrior of Aram (or modern-day Syria), and some captured slave girl from Israel sees his leprosy and tells his wife about some prophet of hers that can heal him. Is he desperate? Is the shame of his condition too much for his warrior pride? In any event, he works through the institutions and has his king send a letter to the Israelite king, with a seemingly impossible task: cure his greatest warrior's leprosy. The king is more than baffled – he thinks the letter is a declaration of war, for if he can't deliver, then his kingdom, his institution, will be held accountable! And if he does deliver and cure his enemy, won't he later attack his people? If institutions fail their objectives and cease to serve the people, then they and their leaders feel threatened as they try to stay in control.

Thankfully that annoying prophet pipes up and says he'll do it. So the great Naaman of Syria arrives at Elisha's residence, only to be told by a servant to go wash himself. For Naaman, the insult couldn't be greater. On foreign soil, ordered by a messenger of his inferior foe to go wash in a foreign river? Does he think my sickness is a joke that can be washed away? How dare he insult me like this! That prophet should at least have the decency to show his face!

Interestingly, it is those with the least power, Naaman's servants, who convince him to go along with the prophet's instructions, for wouldn't their master be willing to do a far greater deed to be healed? Wouldn't we all be willing to jump and swim across that river? So with some difficulty Naaman swallows his pride and his anger, and stoops down into the Jordan. And – miraculously – his leprosy is cured. The festering skin of this great man is restored to the flesh of a little boy. Tears of anguish become tears of joy, and he is overcome with gratitude.

As Naaman returns to his native land, I bet he can't help but wonder that his salvation didn't come through a rival institution but through a little Hebrew girl he held captive... and now he was like a little boy, fleshed cured and set free from social stigma, his heart held captive by this unseemly prophet of a remarkable God – this Yahweh of Israel.

Now let us turn to Mark, a much shorter and yet most puzzling story of healing. Just before the passage we heard read, Jesus has withdrawn from the crowds and his disciples to pray in the early morning. His disciples finally track him down, telling their newfound leader that everyone is looking for him. Jesus responds, "Let us go somewhere else, for I have been called to *preach* elsewhere." And so the Son of Man goes, preaching and casting out demons, with no mention of more healings...

Yet in the very next verse when a leper comes to him, falls to his knees at Jesus' feet, and says, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Most manuscripts have Jesus showing compassion, but in my textual study there is a very strong case that in the original text Jesus shows not compassion... but anger. It is not the leper but the Man of God who is angry. But why on earth would Jesus show anger?

Notice the leper does not ask a question but simply makes a statement. Also notice he's talking about healing rather than words of wisdom or casting out demons – those things Jesus says he's been called to do. Is Jesus angry with this leper's presumption? Is he questioning Jesus' authority or willingness?

After the healing, Jesus' anger remains. The English translation glosses over the Greek, but the words used here to "sternly warn" the man not to tell anyone and to "send him away" are the same words used earlier in Mark for rebuking and casting out demons. In effect, Jesus is treating this man as a demon to be ordered around! And yet this isn't a spirit of the underworld but rather a child of God! Jesus then tells the man to obey the law of Moses and present himself to the priests, as was customary for those healed of leprosy. Jesus wants the man to continue to live within the law, the law that has kept him separate from society... even if it makes them both angry. But this man has no intention of following some outdated custom when the fervor of God's living spirit is pulsing through his veins.

But lest we forget: Jesus makes a statement of his own, first outstretching his hand and touching the forbidden flesh, and then saying, [Gk: *Theo, katharisthEti*] "I AM willing. Be cleansed." I am willing – to cleanse you, to touch you, to change my mission for you.

I wonder if this is a breakout moment for Jesus. I wonder if Jesus begins to see something of God in this man. I wonder if his anger subsides and his joy increases as he witnessed this man's exuberance in telling others what had happened. I wonder if Jesus realizes in this moment that what he was doing – all this preaching, healing and casting out demons – **cannot** and **will** not be contained by an institution... that it might get a little out of hand, that the power of God within him is as uncontrollable as the religious establishment's reaction to him. I wonder if Jesus starts trusting God a little more, the religious rites and regulations a little less, and even more so trusting in the persevering people that come to him and leave rejoicing.

All of us at times are frustrated with the institutional church. We tire of the bureaucracy, the meetings, the politics and bickering. Yet let us not give up hope for her people. Let us not keep the people of God from the healing of God. We, too, are challenged like Jesus to bring not only the Good News to this land, but also the Good Feeling, the Good Healing, the Good Vibrations of God's spirit breaking into this place, this community, this world. It is a monumental task, and Jesus must trust not in the religious

institution of his day, but in the people God pursues, touches and redeems. It's not easy, it's not controllable, but that's what it means to be dynamically alive.

Dare I believe that God is doing a new thing, here on this day and in this – dare I say – institutional church? Dare you believe with me? Dare we believe that God is in our midst – here, now, in this place – working to bring about a new blessing? And with it, a new challenge?

As I sat there on the shores of Lake Victoria, wrestling with my friends' challenge of the church and all her institutions, mandates and rules, I couldn't help but think... "Yeah, but... it's not about that. I'm here because I believe what God is doing through you, that the relief work and clinics and churches are coming about from God's movement... not some institutional decree. I feel God present and at work in my life because I am in relationship with you. And these churches you speak of are more than stone and steeple, rules and regulations. They are communities of the Living God. These people can be every bit as frustrating as the institution, but I believe God's movement is there, even when we can't see it or feel it. Why not put my trust in the people and not the institution? After all, God's Living Spirit abides not in Temples of Cedar but in the Hearts of Human Beings everywhere.

Let us go forth from this place, having faith not only in our God, but also in God's people. May we learn to shout a little louder with them, dance a little longer with them, swim a little farther, and trust God a little deeper with them, this day and those to come. Amen.

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