

Healing the Body
II Kings 5:1-19a
Galatians 6:1-10

“So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.”

This morning there is much I could tell you about the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. Instead I want to tell you one thing. I want to bear witness to God’s hidden work of healing Christ’s church by tracing the story of the healing of Naaman, the Syrian over the broken pieces of our life together, until we begin to see our fragmented selves, our fragmented church, even our fragmented nation, in the light of the mirror of God that Scripture is.

What we know of Naaman the Syrian is this: he was the commander of the army of the King of Aram, a great man who was held in high favor because, under his command, the Lord had given Aram victory. Again we are told, in case we missed the import of the first few superlatives, that Naaman was a mighty warrior. We are also told, in the same breath, that this great commander suffered from leprosy, a highly contagious disease with no known cure. What to do? In the ancient world, the only thing to do, in order to protect the population from a full-blown epidemic, was to isolate and exclude the victims. The paradox is palpable! A man who represented everything the culture valued: this man woke up one morning to find himself on the margins and among the outcast of the social order.

Trace the story over our lives and it becomes a parable. Whether in church or in society, it is as though those who were once at the center of social order are waking up on what seems to them to be the margins. Now living on the margins is a very different place to live, a place where strengths become weaknesses and weaknesses become strengths, where once major characters suddenly find themselves without the social skills necessary to survive as minor characters. Showing deference, listening more than speaking, compromising, quietly acquiescing, avoiding declarative sentences: these are behaviors Naaman never really needed to learn. Put another way, it is one thing to have always been on the margins and wake up marginalized even more—to be a slave, say, waking up with leprosy, a young girl waking up to be an indentured servant; it is another thing to have been a commander, a decider--or even just a presumed member of the majority--and waking up with someone else in the driver’s seat who is taking you where you do not want to go. In every way, Naaman was beside himself, out of control, fearful. It was a strange, new, unwelcome experience.

Enter a young Israelite girl. Captured by Naaman’s army in a raid on Israel, she was the slave of Naaman’s wife. Marginalized does not begin to name her place in Syrian society. Yet, paradox on top of paradox, this slave girl, who logically might have rejoiced at the news of Naaman’s disease and downfall, is used of God to set Naaman’s healing, even Naaman’s salvation, in motion. The girl tells her mistress and her mistress tells her husband that there is a prophet in Samaria who can cure him. What would possess this nameless girl to act on behalf of the man whose army made her a slave? The story is silent on motives.

Likewise, the fact that the promise of a future has come from a slave girl does not deter the now desperate Naaman. If you have ever had a diagnosis turn your life inside-out, you know what it is to grasp at hope, no matter the source. Naaman hurries to the king of Aram who writes a letter to the king of Israel rather than to Elisha. Sometimes power only knows how to speak to power! When Naaman’s entourage arrives at the palace of the king of Israel, loaded down with silver and gold and garments, the king reads the letter, sees the loot and explodes. Unable to heal Naaman, he assumes he has been set-up by the king of Aram and is furious--so furious that word reaches Elisha the prophet in Samaria. “What’s the fuss,” Elisha says in so many words. “Send him to me that he might come to know what true power can do.”

So the horses and the chariots loaded with loot head for Samaria and stop in front of Elisha’s humble abode. Adding insult to injury, Elisha does not even come out to greet Naaman. Rather he sends a messenger to tell him what he must do in order to be healed. This, it seems to me, is the most telling moment of the story: Naaman takes such offense at what he thinks is the prophet’s disrespect of his power and position that he leaves. He would rather die or be excluded from society than be shamed. In a parting shot, he belittles Elisha’s God, suggesting that if his God were really powerful, God would simply wave a hand over him and heal him. “Wash in seven times in the Jordan,” he mumbles. “Why not in the superior the rivers of Syria?” “He turned and walked away,” we read, “*in a rage.*” I repeat: When you have spent your life in the privileged middle or majority, you lack the social skills necessary to survive on the margins. Deference, listening more than speaking, compromising, quietly acquiescing, avoiding declarative sentences: these are behaviors you never really needed to learn.

Enter, once again, the characters with the requisite skills. Used by God to accomplish Naaman’s healing. I imagine his servants trembling as they try to reason with him: “All he said was ‘Wash, and be clean!’ What is there to lose?” Naaman washes seven times and returns to Elisha: healed and humbled and given a whole new life. To our way of seeing, it was as though he had been baptized in the Jordan, for Naaman received the gift of a life with God, whose preferential love for the marginalized knows no end.

In the aftermath of General Assembly, I cannot help but read the story of Naaman's healing as a parable about our own healing as a church. From the beginning of the Assembly, we heard that this was a kairoitic moment—a moment when God's future was breaking in. The time was heralded in the election of co-moderators, both women ordained to the office of Word and Sacrament, one white and one African-American; in the election of the denomination's first African-American Stated Clerk, J. Herbert Nelson, who preached in this pulpit a year ago on Mother's Day; in the confirmation of Tony De La Rosa, the interim head of the Presbyterian Mission Agency who is a Latino, gay married man.

But as one privileged to be a commissioner, I would say that the breaking-in of God's future had more to do with the easily missed moments in committee meetings, at table with strangers, over drinks in hotel bars, on the light-rail at 6:45 in the morning or 10:30 at night. There I watched the formerly marginalized listening, empathizing, thanking and coaxing the once-majority-newly-marginalized to remain in the body. I witnessed God's Spirit healing the body.

Two examples. Before the Assembly, there was much talk about a set of thirteen overtures from Foothills Presbytery in South Carolina. The effect of the overtures would be to slow down the process of addressing social issues to a halt. Almost half of the churches in Foothills Presbytery have left the denomination, most immediately because of the church's stands on full inclusion of LGBTQ members. My committee had the responsibility of responding to all but one of those overtures. The advocate who testified on behalf of Foothills at our committee told us, when asked, that the overtures were written by a group of mostly older white men in the Presbytery. Yet I watched as diverse members of my committee listened and then expressed care, compassion and appreciation to these men. They were exercising the social skills they had learned from generations of living on the margins, but they were doing more: they were being used by God, like the slave girl and the servants of Naaman, as agents of healing. So it happened, on the floor of the plenary, that a member of Foothills Presbytery expressed thanks for the sensitivity and gratitude he felt, for the assurance he had been given, that the overtures had been heard and their underlying values had been included in the committee's actions. Was this not God's hand, I thought, healing the body?

The second example is a personal one. On Wednesday when the Assembly broke for dinner, I remained in my seat to finish writing my part of our committee's report to the Assembly on Thursday. Other than those resetting the stage area, I thought I was alone. Suddenly I looked up to see a very tall commissioner standing in front of me. He asked what committee I was on and when I said, "The Way Forward," he asked, "Does the Way Forward include reconciliation?" I think I said something like, "I hope the way forward *is* reconciliation." Then he began to tell me his experience of the Assembly: "I do not feel God here," he said. "I do not see God in the people here. I see only sin and evil and impurity. I have prayed to God to be released from this denomination and God has not yet released me." I opened my mouth to disagree, but then mustered the social skills I have honed on the margins. He was an older African-American minister serving a mostly white, theologically conservative congregation in Colorado. For thirty minutes I listened and asked God, as I listened, to help me receive what he was saying and be present. At the very end, I asked if he would like to hear my experience of the church. He nodded. I said that, for almost all of my years in the ministry, I had been on the losing side of the votes in General Assembly but stayed. I spoke of my theologically conservative colleagues and friends, with whom I shared a love of Scripture and Reformed theology and Jesus Christ. Then I dared a declarative sentence: I said I believed the only way for the body to be whole was for us to be together in our difference because God has given us to each other in Christ. He was not buying it.

I next saw him at the last service of worship, walking in front of me as we returned to our seats after communion. I ran, tapped him on the back and opened my arms. We embraced. I said I was praying for his heart to heal. He said our conversation was the most important moment for him in the Assembly. Who knew?

Here, then, is the gospel for this morning by way of Naaman's healing: As followers of a marginalized Jew who was dead and is surprisingly alive, you and I have been given eyes to see where and how his love is including and healing and redeeming, is washing in the waters of baptism all who have been marginalized by the fear, in us and around us, that casts out love.

"Because God has already laid the only foundation of our fellowship, because God has bound us together in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ, long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that common life not as demanders, but as thankful recipients...." The words are Dietrich Bonhoeffer's read to my committee before we took up our business. "If we do not give thanks daily for the Christian fellowship in which we have been placed...; if on the contrary, we only keep complaining to God that everything is so paltry and petty, so far from what we expected, then we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow according to the measure and riches which are there for us all in Jesus Christ." Thanks be to God who is on the margins still, healing his body that is the church, in Jesus Christ.