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The Federated Church of Hyannis  
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## **SIMPLE CURES**

II Kings 5:1-14

Mark 1:40-45

“The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy.” Leprosy in the ancient world referred to many skin diseases, not just to Hansen’s disease which is leprosy as we know it today. But because they did not know the difference, and because it was considered to be contagious – as some skin conditions are – and because in their religion and culture it made a person “unclean,” any such diagnosis could result in a person being shunned from contact with anyone other than other “lepers.”

Lepers in Israel were segregated away from all communal life and forced to live in closed and impoverished colonies. Even their clothing and garments were considered to be contaminated and in need of purification. Perhaps Naaman kept his condition hidden from public view. And also the rich and powerful often live by different rules. Whatever the case, Naaman continued in his military post in Syria and evidently had free contact with those around him.

The story of Naaman unfolds with the lowest and least likely person being an agent of the most high God. God made himself known through a slave girl. The Word of God was not given first to a great and powerful man, but to one whom they considered to be the least of humanity. The actions of the four most powerful men in two countries was set in place by one little Jewish slave girl.

Naaman heard from his wife who heard it from her servant that the Lord God of Israel has power to heal. Here we read of the first inquiry of eligibility in medical history when Naaman went to the king of Aram, today’s Syria, who sent a letter of referral to the king of Israel. Then there was the first recorded medical bill – ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of garments. This is worth about a quarter of a million of our dollars, not an uncommon bill for a catastrophic illness.

The first reaction of the CEO of the HMO, i.e., the king of Israel, was to tear his clothes in anguish. The king of Israel was understandably anxious. Naaman was not only a high-ranking member of the enemy nation but also

the chief commander of his king's army – the army that brought down the previous Jewish king, Ahab, with a well-placed arrow. When he arrived it was with his horses and chariots and presumably soldiers bearing weapons. What they did to one king they could easily do to another.

It seems that the king of Israel believed that he was somehow himself responsible for the healing and he believed that he was just being set up to fail. And there was born the practice of medical referral. Israel's king recognized his own limitations and sent Naaman off to Elisha.

When Naaman arrived with his horses and chariots, Elisha did not even bother to go out and greet him. He sent a messenger. There are times when we visit a doctor and we do not want to announce to a crowded waiting room the purpose for our visit. We don't even want to tell the receptionist.

Naaman certainly did not want to call attention to his condition in front of those he commanded. He just wanted Elisha to open his door, let him in and heal him. Naaman did not take kindly to this: "I don't want to talk to the nurse. I want to talk to the doctor." Elisha added humiliation to his embarrassment. No wonder Naaman was angry. Have you ever been angered by a bill for a doctor's visit when you never got to see the doctor, just the doctor's assistant?

Still today in exactly the same regions of the world, in India and China and Pakistan and Iran and Iraq and Afghanistan, Christian health workers get in cultural clashes with people who do not understand the nature of the healing ministry they are conducting. Rotarians who are working to end polio worldwide know of the difficulty in nations where parents refuse to have their children receive a simple inoculation because of the religious and cultural divide.

Perhaps because Naaman was rich and powerful he felt he was entitled to a special miracle. Instead Naaman was ordered to practice simple, ordinary cleanliness. Naaman's power had gotten him nothing. His wealth had gotten him nothing. He could not even scare Elisha into seeing him. Naaman's presence, which had struck fear into the heart of Israel's king, was hardly even recognized by Israel's prophet. Whatever could Elisha be doing? Watching TV? Chatting on line? Taking a nap? We never learn, nor does the frustrated Naaman.

What happened next is equally odd, that Naaman who desperately wanted to be healed would reject the simple thing Elisha told him to do. But it is

exactly what happens every time someone goes to a doctor wanting some expensive medicine or costly procedure only to be told something like, “Eat less, exercise more, and stop holding a grudge against your brother-in-law.” We want the pill and the procedure as long as it is covered, not the simple advice.

It is like a woman who went to her pastor for help. She said, “I have a terrible problem getting out of bed each day. Can you suggest something spiritual that will help me?” “I cannot offer you any spiritual counseling for your problem,” said the pastor. “But I can suggest that you simply put one leg over the edge of the bed each morning and then pull the other leg after it. That way you will be on your feet for the day.” The woman was not too pleased with his counsel. She left to seek a more complex solution.

It is like what happened when instant cake mixes first came on the market. The first cake mixes only required that you add water and bake. But they were very hard to sell because it was too easy. People were used to spending a lot of time and fuss to make a cake. So companies took out the powdered milk and powdered eggs so that people would have to add their own milk and eggs. By making it harder they were able to sell more cake mix.

It is like a young student who asked an aging monk how to live a holy life. The monk told him he must ride his bike 30 miles a day, fast one day a week, bathe monthly in olive oil, and read the Bible through once each year. Two years later they met again, but this time the young man expressed his anger at the monk. He said, “I have ridden my bike 30 miles a day, fasted twice a week, bathed monthly in olive oil, and read the Bible through twice. What I discovered by reading the Bible is that the rest is unnecessary. I am made holy only by the grace of God.” “I know,” said the monk, “but if I told you it was that easy you wouldn’t believe me.”

Elisha’s formula was simple. Wash yourself seven times in the Jordan River. I have never seen the Jordan River up close, but I have seen jars of Jordan River water that people bring back as souvenirs and I can tell you that using such water to baptize an infant can be a health hazard. The Jordan River is at many places a narrow, shallow, muddy river. If the point was simply to wash, Naaman could do that at home where the rivers are a lot nicer and cleaner.

There came next what might be referred to as an intervention. Instead of letting Naaman storm off without getting help, the servants reasoned with

him and coaxed him into doing what Elisha suggested. The other servants are not identified. Perhaps they too were Jews who had been captured along with the slave girl. Perhaps they too knew the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

What was healing in the water of the Jordan? We don't know. We do know that a lot of different skin diseases that were then put into the category of "leprosy" were everything from Hansen's Disease to simple eczema. A lot of skin diseases are rooted in poor hygiene and are cured simply by improved hygiene. And a lot of healing simply has to do with a positive mental state that welcomes healing.

Norman Cousins in his book *Anatomy of an Illness* wrote this about Dr. Albert Schweitzer, "Albert Schweitzer always believed that the best medicine for any illness he might have was the knowledge that he had a job to do, plus a good sense of humor. He once said that disease tended to leave him rather rapidly because it found so little hospitality inside his body."

And a lot of health has to do with our connection with God. Elisha told him to wash in a holy river – the Jordan – a holy number of times – seven. This warrior of Syria did not know or have a relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but humbled by his illness, befriended by a Jewish slave girl, instructed by a prophet of God, he came into the presence of the one who is holy and the one who makes us whole.

Healing is often as mysterious as the healing of Naaman's leprosy which came from washing in the Jordan or the man healed by the touch of Jesus' hand. It is sometimes a process over which we often have very little control. Physicians continue to be mystified by the fact that two patients suffering from the same illness and given the same treatments respond so differently. I believe that healing and health are often largely determined by personal responsibility.

When we were living in Georgia, I was invited to a program held at the Carter Center in Atlanta. The subject of the conference was "The Church's Challenge in Health Care." I never got to speak with President Carter. He was generally surrounded by men with wires going into their ears who were forever speaking into their lapels. President and Mrs. Carter both spoke as did Dr. C. Everett Koop and others.

The speaker whose remarks are most memorable to me was the Reverend Dr. William Foege, a Lutheran pastor and medical doctor. He had been the

Director of the Centers for Disease Control before becoming Director of the Carter Center. The subject of his talk was “The Vision of the Possible: What Churches Can Do.” He touched on many points. As to the church’s responsibility he said we must talk of the unity of the body and the soul, the body being the temple of the Holy Spirit.

He reminded the audience of our responsibility to love our neighbors in their many needs. He pointed out the way that medicine and religion inform and support one another. He said that churches should teach prevention, and good living habits, something churches like the Seventh Day Adventists and Mormons do very well.

Finally the Reverend Dr. Foege said we should learn what we can do for our own health. This is the illustration he used: Life expectancy at birth improved by 25 years during the twentieth century. That does not mean that we can expect to live twenty-five more years than our grandparents at the same age. When our grandparents reached our age they had passed through what were then high rates of infant and childhood mortality.

What Dr. Foege pointed out is that we can actually expect to live only six years more than our grandparents. In a sense, he said, after we have passed through childhood, all twentieth century medicine can give us is six additional years of life. Yet research has shown that a person doing some simple things like not smoking, drinking only in moderation, eating right and exercising will live eleven years longer than a person not doing those things. And so he concluded, “In a sense I am twice as powerful as all of twentieth-century science and medicine in determining my own health destiny.”

And that simple thing is what is missing from the whole health care debate in our country. We all want ready access to good medical care. We all want affordable medicine. But are we willing to do simple things like say, “No thank you. I do not want fries with that.” “Let’s park the car and walk the rest of the way.” “I know that driver just cut me off. I’m just going to let him drive away.”

A few years ago I found myself suffering from debilitating headaches. I was concerned because this is unusual for me. I finally called our family doctor. He examined me, poked and probed me and sent me for X-rays. It revealed nothing to cause headaches.

We then sat in his office where he took out his prescription pad and wrote down # 1, get rest. I protested that I am not good at rest. He told me to give it a try. Then he wrote down # 2, go for walks. I protested that there are no sidewalks in the town. He said he would show me the woodland trails. Meet him at his home on Saturday at 9:00. # 3 was a prescription for headaches, and # 4 was a prescription for sleeping pills.

We met that Saturday and walked, and walked many Saturdays after that until I went walking on my own. I did give active rest a try, but I never needed any pills. The headaches went away when I did that simple thing – get some exercise.

Naaman could have gotten back into his chariot and driven home without any acknowledgement to Elisha who, after all, had not bothered to step outside and see him. He could have let anger boil up inside him. But in his healing, something changed that was much more than skin deep.

What Naaman found was that the first step toward healing was both the easiest and the most humbling. The conclusion we read further in this chapter is that Naaman returned to praise the God of Israel as the only true God on earth. Naaman finally met Elisha, so that he could confess his new faith and request that he be allowed to bring Israel's God back to his nation by hauling some Israelite dirt back with him. The request is declined, the first record of the denial of medical benefits.

We don't need to move mountains to achieve health. There are all kinds of simple things people do to bring themselves health and healing. It is the simple things that count, often that count the most, as Naaman learned, like hygiene, prayer and faith in the one who heals us. That is what triggered the healing of the man who came to see Jesus. And we can live as Naaman came to live, with the simplest, healthiest thing we can have: gratitude.

Gratitude is such a simple thing. It is simply being able to take someone's hand and look them in the eye and say, "Thank you so much." Gratitude is a simple thing. It is stopping by the card aisle, addressing the envelope, perhaps writing down a few words, putting on a stamp and dropping it in the mail. Gratitude is a simple thing. It is lifting the receiver, pushing some buttons, and saying a few words of appreciation. Gratitude is a simple, healing thing. It is folding our hands, closing our eyes and from our heart saying, "Thank you God. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."