

Sermon Year B Epiphany 6

2 Kings 5:1-15b Psalm 42 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 Mark 1: 40-45

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St. Mary of the Hills, Blowing Rock, NC

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## JUST FAMILY

*Can you fix this? It's a broken heart.  
It was fine, but it just fell apart.  
It was mine, but now I give it to you,  
'Cause you can fix it, you know what to do.*

Those are the words that open an old Dar Williams song titled FAMILY.  
I also think they might be the words  
the man with leprosy speaks,  
as he approaches Jesus.

*A leper came to Jesus begging him...*

This is just so out of order.  
Lepers, in that time, did not come to people.  
They were banished to stay away, to stay apart.  
There was even a legal limit to the distance you had to stay from other people.  
Lepers could not come within 150 yards<sup>1</sup> of people who were "clean."

150 yards.  
Do you know how huge a distance that is?  
Longer than a football field.  
A football field is 120 yards long (I checked it on Google).

Imagine, you are standing under one goal post  
and your husband or your wife or your brother or your best friend  
or your beloved child  
is standing way beyond the other goal post  
at the other end of the field.  
It is as close as you can come,  
Without breaking the law,  
Without risking becoming unclean yourself.

No more sweet things whispered.  
No more meals shared together around the kitchen table.  
No more teasing or joking around with each other.  
No more goodnight kisses.

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert O'Driscoll, THE WORD AMONG US, Year B Volume 1, (Toronto: Anglican Book Center)page 97.

Stay away. You are unclean.  
Don't come near us.

If the wretched disease does not kill you,  
then the loneliness—the broken heart-- probably will.

A leper comes to Jesus.  
And Jesus doesn't run away terrified  
or shout GET BACK! STAY AWAY FROM ME!  
YOU'RE BREAKING THE LAW!  
Jesus just stands there and lets him come.

Jesus and the leper are breaking all the rules.

*A leper came to Jesus begging him...*  
He begs Jesus.  
He falls on his knees in front of Jesus,  
because Jesus is his last hope.

And the next words in this passage from Mark's gospel say: *Moved with pity...*

Jesus is right there with this man who has no where else to go,  
no one else to turn to for help.

Jesus looks down at his fellow human being and realizes this man,  
this shunned and despondent man,  
is offering all that he has, all that he is,  
essentially saying, "If you don't help me, there is no help."

This leper has hit bottom, we might say.  
This leper realizes he has no power to help himself.  
This leper goes to the only one left to turn to and he begs,  
*If you choose, you can make me clean.*

And Jesus reaches out his hand and touches this man and says to him,  
*I do choose.*

In our Old Testament reading this morning,  
Naaman, a mighty warrior, suffers now from leprosy.  
He hears from a slave girl about one who can cure him in her home country of Israel.

So Naaman takes silver and gold and fine garments and sets off to buy himself a cure.  
He even takes a letter from the king.

Naaman thinks it is the king of Israel,  
the man with the political power and the social prestige,  
who will heal him.

But when he arrives in the king's court, the king says,  
*You must be kidding me!*  
*Cure you? Impossible! I wouldn't know where to even begin.*

But the prophet Elisha, the man of God,  
hears about Naaman and the king,  
shrugs his shoulders and says,  
*Humph! Too bad he didn't come to me!*

Then Naaman does hear and he does come,  
full speed with his chariots and horses and all the showings of his success,  
But Elisha just sends a message: “  
*Go wash in the Jordan seven times.*

And Naaman is mad. Furious.  
*How dare he not come and meet with me in person?!!*  
*Doesn't he know who I am!?!!*

Naaman is used to a little more protocol.  
*I thought surely he would have some really special healing ritual—just for me.*  
*I can pay him very well, you know.*  
*I'm rich. I'm powerful. I have a letter from the king!*

But you see, the prophet Elisha treats Naaman like family.  
He doesn't fear him  
nor does he stand in awe of this enemy army commander.  
Elisha just sees another human being who needs help, who needs healing.

Elisha does not make a big deal about Naaman,  
He doesn't bend and bow to Naaman's grandiose hoop dee doo celebrity.  
He just treats him like family.

But what Elisha does know  
is the courage it took for Naaman to come into enemy territory  
and ask for help.  
Even though Naaman does it in his own rather pompous and demanding way  
(you can't just stop being a general overnight!),  
Elisha still sees a person in need, a person who—in his own way—is begging for help,  
asking for mercy,  
a person who has no where else to go, no one else to ask.

Elisha offers the mercy of God:

*You need healing?*

*Don't we all.*

*Wash, and be clean.*

Elisha is essentially telling Naaman,

*Regardless of whom you may pretend to be,*

*I see you as just family, part of God's family.*

*We love you, but you're going to have to get your own towel*

*and carry your own bar of soap.*

*head on down to the Jordan and wash yourself.*

*Seven times.*

And finally stubborn Naaman does.

He goes and immerses himself in the cleansing, healing waters.

He opens his whole body—his complete naked self—

to the only one who shows mercy to him.

He washes and is made clean.

Naaman is healed not only of his leprosy

but of his arrogance and his self-centeredness,

healed of his foolish illusion

that he needs no one else in the world but himself.

It is Naaman's realization of his own helplessness

that leads him into the waters of the Jordan.

When things fall apart in our lives—

when we suffer illness,

when someone we love dies,

when we are separated from what has given our life meaning,

when someone turns their back on us and shuns us like a leper,

when we find ourselves confused or lonely,

broken or just plain broke,

it is indeed enough to bring us to our knees.

*Can you fix this? It's a broken heart.*

*It was fine, but it just fell apart.*

*It was mine, but now I give it to you.*

Lord, have mercy.