

The Rev. Wanda R. Copeland

## Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, Year B

02/12/2012

2 Kings 5:1-14

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Psalms 30

Mark 1:40-45

Our story begins today with Naaman traveling to Israel to be healed of leprosy. Naaman was a great and famous general, and his king did not want to lose such a great leader to the scourge of leprosy. At the urging of an Israeli slave girl, Naaman goes to the Israeli king.

We can imagine this entourage travelling toward Israel with horses and chariots carrying bags of gold, clothes from Neiman Marcus, silver bars, even the kitchen sink and perhaps a watermelon. Naaman and his not-so-merry band bop along.

When this procession of men, animals and booty gets to the king of Israel, he is flummoxed, because he has no clue what to do. The great prophet, Elisha, saves the day! He says, Ok, brave and famous warrior, go and wash in my mucky, creek out back. Fortunately, the legion of soldiers, cooks, and bartenders who accompanied Naaman convinced the outraged mighty warrior to wallow in the muck. Out he came, clean and fresh as a daisy.

Our story gradually fades from the famous Naaman to the nameless, faceless, poor man who approaches Jesus in today's gospel. It is worth noting that this is the first person to approach Jesus on his own. No one has pushed, carried, or urged him. He comes and throws himself at Jesus' feet, begging: "Lord, if you want you can heal me."

Jesus knew what life would have been like for this man. Pushed from the mainstream, robbed of a future of gathering with friends for a chat, watching kids play, or engaging in the simple chatter that we call society. This man was an outcast—in the eyes of every layperson around him; and worse, in the eyes of the religious authorities. He would not be able to come to synagogue, or temple, lead family prayers, engage in pious contrition, or raucous celebration. He was non-existent. He could not touch his children or his wife for fear of bringing them into his non-existence and branding them forever.

Our reading of today's gospel follows the predominant translation that says Jesus was *moved with pity*. Another ancient textual source translates that passage as: Jesus was filled with anger. Most of us would prefer the first translation. We don't like to see or imagine Jesus as angry. Anger, his or ours, makes us uncomfortable. Control—of emotions, of the situation, of one's responses—is far more acceptable. Which is what makes it intriguing for us to really SEE Jesus angry. Ponder his outrage at the injustice of this innocent man with a convicting skin condition—abandoned by his friends, co-workers, neighbors, and loving family. They were all required by law to walk away. He was shunned and belittled; an embarrassment to everyone.

Jesus, filled with anger, said to the leper, “I **do** choose.” This is central to Mark’s characterization of Jesus. Bonnie Bowman Thurston, in *Preaching Mark*, says, “Anger is an appropriate response to the devastating effects of disease, especially disease that leads to social ostracism.”<sup>1</sup>

We are challenged to see anger as the obverse of pity. Pity leads us to soft, mushy sentimentality. Anger forces us to action. Pity allows us to huddle in masses of like-minded, caring people and utter, “Oh, poor thing. Isn’t it a shame?” Anger pushes us to stand in front of tanks, march in lines against an oppressive army, and sometimes get killed. Anger drains ambiguity from us, and propels us to stand up for the right.

I was leading Evening Prayer on Tuesday. Using last week’s propers, I was prepared to offer a short reflection on the authority of Jesus. From the back row, scruffy-voiced Lee said, “I don’t want to talk about anything but love. It’s all about love.” Turning that over quickly in my mind, I had to re-construct my words to link authority and love. That wasn’t so hard.

And neither is this. Jesus wasn’t angry today because of the man’s request, or because the disciples let the leper get close to him. He was angry because justice was being denied. Today’s leprosy-ridden beggar is our brother. He was the victim of life forces beyond his control. We witness, or are the victim of, equally disenfranchising injustices today.

This week, we send cards, flowers, and chocolate as symbols of our sentimental expressions of passion or deep abiding care for others. It is Valentine’s Day minus two, in case you hadn’t heard. Yet, too often, we forget the source of love is our creator who gave us life because of love. We forget that same creator held a rainbow in the sky to remind us of God’s promise, not ours, that love is eternal. Jesus came to affirm that we are to have life and have it abundantly in his name.

We can be remiss in sketching the full portrait of love. We settle for a mere outline of the promise of love by seeing only darkly in that mirror. We see darkly now, in part, because it requires less of us. We can comfortably stand on the street-corner and watch life pass by as if it were one big parade. Eternal, anger-producing love forces us to join the parade of life.

From the start, Jesus was clear what he came to do. He was articulate, focused, and unambiguous. It was about love; the love that compelled and propelled him to action. It is into that love that Jesus calls us as disciples.

I have joined in a group of clergy from Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Baha’i and Buddhist traditions to preach this weekend on love. We are committed to preaching about love of our creator, the one who gave us life, and the ecological systems that sustain our life. We have pledged to crack open the door of love this weekend, and invite us all to seek a deeper commitment to love. Love of neighbor, love of God, love of family—all these require us to begin by caring for the cocoon of life in which we are all bound.

Eternal life is our goal; yet I believe with all my heart that we will be called to account for our stewardship of the precious gifts of this fragile earth. None is more tender, or in need of our devotion. While it is full of amazing wonder and sights that daily take our breath away, we are taking its breath away by our shortsighted sentimental nonchalance that 'all will be well'. We blithely think that nothing **seven billion** humans do can *really* hurt the earth while we are standing on its very throat. By our recklessness we are unsustainably squandering resources, and changing our climate worldwide. Even the Twin Cities has a persistent brownish tint which clouds our skies and chokes our lungs. Our effect on our climate is surpassing the earth's natural ability to heal itself. We are not the ones bringing healing, but rending. We can do better. As Christ's disciples we are called to love life as tenderly as he did; fight for justice as valiantly as he did; and seek to bring our lives in line with the values we espouse.

I believe we too often see our role as insignificant in the grand scheme of life. Who am I? What is the value of one person? How can I make a difference even if I wanted? The world's problems seem so large, and I'm only one. Yet, God has placed us in this time and place for a reason. We are not without power. We have audacious power to transform harm and incarnate justice. Pity can stir our emotions. Righteous anger at blatant abuse of God's beloved air, water and land can lead to change.

The leper whom Jesus healed today was so overcome with gratitude that he shouted it with all he had. With privilege comes the opportunity and responsibility to care. Challenging systems, including our own, is part and parcel of our calling. Today, I ask you to pray earnestly, and diligently what you might do to care for the precious gift of life our creator has bestowed upon us.

In closing, I offer sections from a poem by a Kentucky farmer:

So, friends, every day do something  
that won't compute. Love the Lord.  
Love the world. Work for nothing.  
Take all that you have and be poor.  
Love someone who does not deserve it.

...

Give your approval to all you cannot  
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man  
has not encountered he has not destroyed.  
Ask the questions that have no answers.  
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.  
Say that your main crop is the forest  
that you did not plant,  
that you will not live to harvest.

...

Put your faith in the two inches of humus  
that will build under the trees  
every thousand years.

...

Expect the end of the world. Laugh.  
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful  
though you have considered all the facts.

...

Practice resurrection.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *Preaching Mark*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002 p.27

<sup>2</sup> Wendell Berry, Manifesto: The Mad Farmer's Liberation Front from [Reclaiming Politics \(IC#30\)](#) Fall/Winter 1991, Page 62  
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