

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, B  
2 Kings 5:1-14  
Church  
Psalm 30  
1 Corinthians 9:24-27  
Mark 1:40-45

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When you're a mother with very young children, you look at matters of "clean and unclean" with discerning eyes. Today my boys are in grade school and they seem to be filthy a good bit of the time, covered in magic marker stains and mud, but when they were babies I had no tolerance for any of that. I armed my diaper bag with every kind of baby wipe and germ-killing hand wash invented. When we went into a restaurant, I would wipe down the high chair, the tray, the table top, and everything else within reach, not to mention the kid himself, before settling him in to eat. I remember being unreasonably delighted when the grocery stores first began providing antibacterial wipes you could use to clean off the handles of the grocery carts before you put your toddler in the child seat. "Clean and unclean" were vivid realities for me, and I defended that boundary with zeal.

In Jesus' day, the boundaries between clean and unclean were also zealously defended. And the man in our gospel reading was on the wrong side of the boundary. Back then, anybody who came down with "scaly-skin" disease was immediately separated from their family and forced to camp out with other beggars outside the town. If you had leprosy, you immediately lost your home, your income, your family, your community – everything. Being branded "unclean" would literally keep you at a distance, a prescribed distance, from all healthy people until the day you died.

That's why what Jesus did was so shocking. Jesus touched the man with leprosy. He stretched out his hand and touched him. Which was against every religious regulation, not to mention common sense. If his mother was there, I know she would have been horrified. In fact, we can imagine everyone around Jesus gasping at the sight, because touching this unclean man made Jesus unclean, too. Jesus' own skin became ritually polluted. But Jesus was so deeply moved by the way leprosy had wrecked this man's life, that Jesus intentionally chose to touch him. To show that Jesus wasn't afraid of this disease. To show that making a person whole mattered more than honoring religious taboos. To show that God's power could make this man clean -- clean enough to go show himself to the priests, who were the "keepers of clean" in that day, so he could be approved to return to his family, his home, his livelihood. Jesus did so much more than heal this man's body. He gave him back his whole life.

It's a powerful story. We see exactly what Jesus came for – to bring God's power of healing into the world. To make the wounded whole, to raise up those who are bowed down, to set the captives free. And we see what price Jesus is willing to pay to make this happen – to put his own safety on the line in order to set God's healing power loose in creation.

It has tremendous power to encourage us, and yet I have to admit that I sometimes have trouble preaching on these healing stories, because there are not many of us who experience the kind of instant, complete healing we find described in the Bible. Sometimes it does happen-- yes it does-- and when it does we give God all the credit, because we know these miracles come straight from God. We continually pray for this kind of gift. But in our day-to-day reality, things tend to be more gray than black-and-white. What is the best way to understand God's healing presence in the ordinary times, in our everyday lives, when recovery comes slowly or sometimes not at all?

When we're ill, there is a sense of being "unclean" that can be real and painful. A nurse I know has said she senses that many people who are sick carry around a certain amount of shame. Shame because they feel there's something "wrong" with them, more than just physically. They may somehow feel responsible for their illness, as if they might have done something to displease God and somehow deserve punishment. If they were good, the logic goes, they would be healthy, God would bless them. It isn't rational, and it doesn't square with what we believe, but the feeling of being "unclean" can linger.

I've learned a lot from Kathy Black, a writer who sees herself first as a person, and second as someone with a disability. When Kathy was a child she was exposed to toxic waste that damaged her nervous system, leaving her with debilitating muscle weakness, trouble with walking or standing, and sometimes temporary paralysis. Kathy knows the feeling of shame and stigma that can go with having a disability, and the discrimination too-- the way people with disabilities are often viewed as "not whole" or even "less than human," how they have trouble being accepted simply as who they are.

Kathy doesn't believe sickness or disability is part of God's plan. It's not given to punish people, and it's not given to teach people something, either. Kathy doesn't have much tolerance for people who suggest that having more faith will cure you — you know, "just believe harder and that will do the trick." In fact, Kathy makes a clear distinction between being *cured* and being *healed*.

Being *cured* means putting an end to physical symptoms. Sometimes that's possible and sometimes it's not. Kathy says, "Let's face it, no amount of faith will bring back the legs of a veteran that were amputated as a result of injury during a war."

On the other hand, being *healed* is something much broader. Kathy says *being healed* is about well-being, comfort, support, and a sense of peace in mind and spirit. We can pray for *healing* in any situation — even while we're being realistic that a *cure* isn't probable, or maybe even possible. Kathy doesn't expect her own disability to be *cured*, but she is fully convinced that God is *healing* her, daily, in the sense of bringing her well-being, support, and peace.

She believes God takes the lives we have, just as they are, and provides transforming opportunities that allow us to live with our difficult conditions in grace and dignity. In her life, Kathy sees *healing* happening through everyday gestures like someone's comfort-

ing touch, or someone's loving acceptance of her. *Healing* comes through simple things like a hug or an invitation to a meal. For her these are signs of God *healing* her, not some dramatic day in the future, but here and now, in real time and in real life.

(Kathy Black, "A Perspective of the Disabled: Transforming Images of God, Interdependence, and Healing" in *Preaching Justice*, edited by Christine Marie Smith, United Church Press, 1998)

I'm reminded of how Jesus stretched out his hand to touch the man who was so isolated in his disease of leprosy. Jesus stretched out his hand to show definitively that this man was "clean" in God's eyes, that he had value and worth and dignity. More than this, Jesus stretched out his hand to show simple love.

And isn't that what all of us need most, in the midst of the various kinds of limitations and painful conditions we live with, in the midst of the dis-ease and struggle that mark our experience... When someone stretches out a hand to touch us this way, we give God credit and thanks. And when we are able to stretch out a hand and touch someone else in this way, then we give God credit, too. And we realize that this is what it means to be part of God's healing power working in real life, in all those gray areas where dramatic cures may never come.

Every day, people's lives are being washed clean through holy compassion and love.

And today we celebrate Zoe's baptism, which we understand as a kind of "washing clean" – a ritual bath (in a tiny little bathtub!). As we baptize Zoe, we might be reminded of the story of Naaman, the army commander with leprosy who was instructed to wade into the water of the Jordan River seven times. As he did that, he found that his skin was made new. The Bible says it was "restored like the flesh of a young boy" - like Zoe's soft, sweet baby skin.

Now, with all the wrinkles and blemishes and scars and sags most of us carry around, signs of our years of experience, we don't imagine that our own skin will ever literally be restored like sweet baby skin again. But the story speaks to us still. Even when life does not allow us to literally be made brand new, like a baby, somehow miraculously – even so, God's love washes us clean. And washed in God's love, we truly are made new.

I pray that that newness, that freshness, that sweetness, will shape Zoe's character as she grows, just as it continues to shape all of us. Amen.

