

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
October 12, 2025 – The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c; Luke 17:11-19
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

You will have noticed that our lesson from the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible and the passage from the Gospel of Luke are connected by their accounts of people healed from leprosy. In ancient biblical writings the term “leprosy” was used to describe a range of skin ailments, not only what we know as leprosy, or Hansen’s disease. More about that shortly.

Our Old Testament lesson is puzzling because it leaves out a bit of the narrative, in which the king of Aram (Syria) writes to the king of Israel on behalf of Naaman, the Aramean general. The Israelite king fears that his likely failure to heal Naaman is a pretext for an invasion, and he knows that Syria, though not a powerful empire like Assyria, was nonetheless powerful enough to be a threat to Israel. That worry, however, is unnecessary because the agent for Naaman’s cure is Elisha, the Hebrew prophet and miracle-worker who was the disciple of the prophet Elijah and his successor.

Back to the issue of skin ailments. One distinction between God and human beings is that God does not die and we do. In ancient Judaism it was believed that a person should not go into God’s presence – that is, into the Temple to offer sacrifice and to worship God – if death had seemed in some way to have encroached upon the person. This might be because a person had touched a corpse. Or if the person was bleeding, since the blood of a person or animal was equated with its life and losing blood implied losing life. Or it might be because of a skin condition which caused a person’s flesh to look as if it were dying or decomposing.

Long and detailed rules were written down in the book of Leviticus in the Hebrew Bible about what kinds of skin ailments rendered a person ceremonially unclean. The priests of the Temple were the persons responsible for examining people and deciding whether or not they could worship in the Temple. This is why Jesus says to the ten lepers who asked for mercy, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” Jesus was telling them, in effect, that they would be healed, so that once the priests examined them, they would be pronounced ceremonially clean.

Another aspect of the lepers’ condition is that they could transfer their impurity to others by touch. The Hebrew Bible makes the implication of this clear: “Command the Israelites to put out of the camp everyone who is leprous” (Numbers 5:2). Lepers were required to make their condition known to others by wearing torn clothes, having disheveled hair, and crying out “Unclean, unclean” (Leviticus 13:45). When the ten lepers asked Jesus for mercy, they called out to him from a distance, from their place as outcasts of the community.

Though all of this is very foreign to us and we may be critical of these practices, we need to realize what leprosy meant in Jesus’ religious tradition to appreciate this morning’s lesson. Leprosy had significant repercussions regarding a person’s ability to worship God in the Temple and to remain part of the Jewish religious community by keeping its religious laws. It effectively broke a person’s ties with family and the larger social community. Being healed of leprosy meant a return to all that a person would hold most dear in life. A leper was an outcast who could only associate with other outcasts. The Samaritan leper was doubly an outcast because Jews regarded Samaritans as not fully Jewish and so they were looked down upon. The Samaritan “turned back, praising God with a loud voice,” and thanked Jesus for his mercy and for healing him. Jesus receives the Samaritan’s thanks and sends him back on his way. He

says, “your faith has made you well” – literally, “your faith has saved you.” All the lepers were healed of their skin ailments. The Samaritan was also “saved.”

For many weeks I have invited people to come to the front of the church after the service to pray with me for healing for themselves or someone else. I begin by saying, “I lay my hands upon you and anoint you in the name of our Savior Jesus Christ,” and then we pray. When we act “in the name of Jesus,” we intend our behavior to be like the behavior of Jesus. I would like to speak about what we do, why we do what we do, and what might result from our prayer.

The New Testament is full of accounts of Jesus healing people. He healed people in several ways. Sometimes, as in the account we heard today, a person begs Jesus for healing, and Jesus acts to heal. Sometimes healing is indirect. Think of the woman who had hemorrhaged for 12 years. In a crowd she secretly touched Jesus’ garment and was healed by the power that flowed out from him. Jesus healed people at a distance. Think of the Roman centurion’s slave or the Samaritan woman whose daughter had a demon. Each person requested healing for someone not present, and Jesus healed the person from a distance. Sometimes Jesus’ first attempt at healing was incomplete, as with the blind man whose restored vision was blurred until Jesus tried a second time. Often, we read that healing was connected to forgiveness. Perhaps the most compelling account of this was the healing of the paralyzed man lowered through the roof by his friends so that he could be in Jesus’ presence. Jesus perceived the faith of the friends and said to the man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” The religious leaders who witnessed this were critical of Jesus. To prove that he had the authority to forgive sins, Jesus healed the man: “Rise, take up your pallet and go home”(Mark 2:11).

In the Gospels we read many accounts of Jesus, a powerful healer. In our church we believe that healing continues to take place through prayer in the name of Jesus. One of the clearest instructions in the New Testament that healing is meant to be a work of the church is found in the Letter of James: “Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.”

So, what might happen when we pray for healing today? There is a very wide range of possible “results.” These are some that I have experienced, participated in, or witnessed over the years. A person may be immediately cured of a serious medical condition or disease. However, prayer often does not result in a cure. After all, no one can be cured of mortality; all of us will die from some cause. But prayer may work with medical treatment and support medical treatment; science and religion acting synergistically. In another parish I served, a man diagnosed with lung cancer came for healing prayer at church every week. When the disease was discovered, this man was given 6 months to live. But time after time the medications and treatments he was given worked for longer and worked more powerfully than his physicians expected. After 7 years of full strong life, he died peacefully. I have witnessed prayers for healing help a person breathe better, calm someone on his deathbed, decrease pain and anxiety, and increase patience and peace. When we pray for the healing of someone else – or even of ourselves – we may never know the results. Our call is simply to pray.

When we pray for healing, we are placing our trust in God and staying connected to God. That is what faith is. Trust and an ongoing relationship with God in every circumstance of our lives, in every condition we are in, in all our thoughts and in all our feelings. No matter what does or does not result from prayer, whether or not we are “made well,” that trust, that connection, that faith “saves us,” as Jesus said. Salvation – wholeness – comes from God. It is always right to trust in God and to pray for the salvation that comes from God. In Jesus’ name. Amen.