

Making Life More Difficult

2 Kings 5:1-14

A sermon given by Rev. Casey W. FitzGerald on the Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, February 15, 2009, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Text

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. ²Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." ⁴So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. ⁵And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. ⁶He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." ⁷When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." ⁸But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel."

⁹So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. ¹⁰Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." ¹¹But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! ¹²Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. ¹³But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" ¹⁴So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

If one defines success as "the attainment of wealth, position, honors and the like"¹—Naaman seemed to have it all. He was the commander of the Aramean army, known as a great man who found incredible favor with the King of Aram, and he had brought impressive victory to his kingdom. But, we are told, "though a mighty warrior," Naaman suffered from leprosy. His leprosy was not the severest kind, as those lepers were often forbidden and unable to be active in communal life. It is thought that his leprosy was a mild skin form of the disease. Nevertheless, it is clear that Naaman's leprosy caused him serious suffering. And it may be that Naaman felt his leprosy had always overshadowed his successes.

Naaman went to great lengths to end his affliction. His were the actions of a man desperate for something to be done...now. Any person who has suffered such affliction can understand something of Naaman's desperation. His acts are echoed today in the sometimes extreme ways people seek out cures for their ailments: traveling to far away countries, the spending of life-savings, and many other drastic measures are taken in search for a cure. We can guess that Naaman had already gone to see every doctor and every healer immediately available to him. But it was all to no avail. Naaman sought, Naaman *needed*, a miracle.

The prospect of a miracle may seem quite foreign to many of us. Miracles such as the one Naaman finds at Elisha's door are the stuff of stories...or, if they are witnessed in our lifetime, they are few and far between. After all...if they happened all the time, would they really seem that miraculous? No...we suppose that miracles must be the greatest of exceptions:

A virgin birth

A blind man's sight restored

Resurrection

The cleansing of a leper

Miracles are the impossible made possible. They surpass our understanding. And we attribute these impossible possibilities to God. Many of us who've faced the direst of situations have dared to pray for a miracle. But all of us know that much of our suffering in this life goes uncured. Indeed, it seems that the human condition is one of suffering. For those of you who have prayed to God for a miracle cure and have been met with silence, texts such as the one we find in Second Kings can be particularly challenging.

Such was the case for Bill Williams,ⁱⁱ a man who lived with cystic fibrosis and eventually died from cystic fibrosis. Cystic Fibrosis, or CF, is a chronic illness that affects the pancreas, respiratory system, and sweat glands.ⁱⁱⁱ In his book, “Naked Before God: The Return of a Broken Disciple,” Williams writes of his lifetime struggle with both CF and with God. The book is, in fact, a journey and a dialogue between Williams and God. It is a beautiful account of one man’s efforts to understand his own suffering. He explains that he was born with a spine in the shape of a question mark—as if his body itself was asking, “WHY GOD?” Stories of miracle healings, suggestions to enhance his prayer life, and any advice referring to strength found through suffering, only served to add insult to injury.

He hears the words of the Apostle Paul to the Romans, “Let us even rejoice in our present sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; and perseverance produces character; and character, hope.” He hears these words and is appalled. Williams, with aching sarcasm, responds, “Suffering produces *hope*? Let me tell you about the kind of hope suffering produces. I am bowed and beaten, flinching at the prospect of being noticed by God, yet terrified at being forgotten. That’s what lies at the bottom of my foundation; that’s the wonderful character suffering has brought me.”^{iv} Bill Williams was afflicted. He was *not* cured. There is no real cure for CF—only treatment of symptoms—which wears a body down in a very short span of time. Williams, like so many of us, struggled to understand who this creator God is who made him in such a way, and why he remained so afflicted. The book creatively documents this struggle and the lengths to which Williams is willing to go to find healing. At many points, he feels overwhelmed by disappointment and anger.

These feelings of frustration, disappointment and anger were not foreign to Naaman. In efforts to pursue his miracle, we are told that he went as far as to:

- Listen to the advice of a lowly slave girl (an action uncharacteristic for men of his stature)
- He dared to approach the king of Aram for help—seeking permission to go into a foreign land
- Gathered together a large amount of treasure to present to the prophet in return for healing
- Traveled to this foreign and adversarial kingdom to ask for healing from the king (And we should note that this was the kingdom from which his wife’s slave girl was captured!)
- Sought out an unknown prophet and traveled a long way to meet him

Naaman and his entourage journey a great distance to Elisha’s door expecting a miracle. For Naaman, the anticipation of this miracle must have built up increasingly as he made his way to the prophet’s home. He hopes that a lifetime of suffering will be taken away with one man’s swift efforts. But when he gets to the prophet’s door, he is not met by the warm welcome of Elisha himself, but was greeted at the entrance by one of Elisha’s servants. Naaman is not even invited in. He becomes enraged by the lack of proper greeting...he had come to be healed by the literal hands of the prophet, and instead is told to go bathe in a river seven times by some random servant. This great warrior is insulted and incensed. And because of his rage and his reluctance—because of his pride—he almost lets the miracle pass him by. “I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?”

It seems that because the terms of Naaman’s healing lacked the challenge and grandeur he had come to expect, he was nearly willing to overlook them. He had traveled so far, and now wanted the grand gesture, big-show-miracle-healing he deserved. Of course, that’s not what he got. It is Naaman’s servants who approach him and talk some sense into him: “Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash, and be clean?’” Leaving his pride at the door, Naaman takes his final step toward healing and strips down by the banks of the Jordan and baths himself until he is clean. So, Naaman, despite his best efforts at self-sabotage, is cured. He finds his miracle.

There are many valuable and challenging messages we can glean from this Scripture lesson—too many to cover in one sermon. I was initially drawn to the idea that because of Naaman’s pride he almost misses his opportunity for healing. In effect, he makes his life more difficult by his unwillingness to submit to the simple instructions given by Elisha. He temporarily overlooks his cure because he desires a more sophisticated healing, worthy of a man of his stature. So then, the question posed to the readers becomes: what are we doing to block our own healing in this life? Are we holding back ourselves because of pride, fear, anger, etc., because we feel that to be healed would necessitate some grand effort on our part? Or, are we waiting for God to do all the work? These are valuable questions for us all—whether we are looking for healing of body, mind or heart. And maybe part of our issue is that we often make things more difficult for ourselves by seeking the wrong sort of healing.

As I neared the end of this sermon-writing process, I realized that this sermon has been a long time in the making. Six years ago, in my final semester at seminary, I took a preaching class entitled, “Preaching as Pastoral Care.” It was a small class in which we were to choose a specific pastoral care situation, and our final project was to write a sermon or a

paper reflecting on how the affliction could be addressed through the preaching moment. The summer leading into that year I had done my first unit of study as a hospital chaplain. I became very close to a nineteen year old woman with cystic fibrosis. After three months of hospitalization, Stephanie died. It was the first death of a young person I had gone through. I was devastated. And so, when I went to choose a project, I was drawn to study CF. When the semester ended and it came time to choose—paper or sermon—I sheepishly chose paper. I had wanted to write a sermon, but I couldn't. I concluded in my paper that I was just not ready to preach a gospel of hope in what still felt like a hopeless situation. I heard no good news. I saw no miracles. Where was God in all of this?

In Williams' book, God enters the dialogue to make his case. Hear these excerpts from his poem, "God's Page."

Haven't I
Ended every drought
With rain?
I don't know what to do
This frustrated bellow in my throat
Unheard
I have met every fear with
Real bread
And wine from the west
Poured over your
Stubborn head and yet
You never stop
To remember.
You are making me old
When I should be young
This world is green
And new
Can't you stop and see?
...
I tried to get it close
Enough so you
Couldn't ignore the message.

....

I moved Heaven and Earth
For you
And you forget
So fast.

I don't know how
To get through

You're not
The only one
Screaming.^v

It occurs to me that in Naaman's case, as in Williams' case (and I believe in Stephanie's case), the miracle may not have been the healing of a body. Though Naaman's healing is an outward one, his flesh is completely restored, it also seems that there is some inward healing. Look at all the steps it took to get him there—he humbled himself to take the advice of servants, to submit to the frustrating requests of a no-show prophet—he totally exposed himself to be bathed in the waters of the Jordan and in leaving his pride behind, his affliction followed suit. For Williams there is a realization that God's healing is more than bodily—though that will come too. He writes:

"Jesus *is* healing me, in ways you refuse to understand. The most important healing is going on far below. Down in the tangled wiring of my being, neurons are starting to zag, kinks are coming out. You can't see any of this,

and I can't explain it as well as I would wish. But somehow, the Son touches me where it really hurts. My spine is starting to unbend.

When he prays in the garden and his prayer is answered "no"; when he feels forsaken; when he cries against God; this is when I know I am not alone. He walks into hell with me; he breaks the bonds of my lonely pain. I know that I am feeling nothing he has not felt. I know I am not more disgraceful, disgusting or blasphemous than he. And know his resurrection is not just one more perk that the rich kids get—that his punishment will be my punishment too.

This is the punishment for being human:

We will be saved from our wrath, our pain, our silence, our disgrace, our void, our death. We will be brought into the New Jerusalem, where our healing will be made complete."^{vi}

This was the good news for Bill Williams, it was the good news for Stephanie, and is the good news for us all.

Maybe your ailments are not so great as leprosy or cystic fibrosis—maybe you suffer a broken relationship, a mourning heart, inconsolable anger or guilt, maybe you're knees are buckling under the burdens you carry. Maybe you suffer alongside a loved one. Maybe you suffer alone. Maybe, like Naaman, your cure will just take one last round of effort. Maybe, like Bill Williams, you are on a lifetime journey which requires constant reminders of God's love, compassion, commitment and sacrifice.

Hear the words of our Lord Jesus Christ as are found in Matthew: "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Let the miracle healing begin.

ⁱ success. (n.d.). *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Retrieved February 14, 2009, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/success>

ⁱⁱ Williams does not actually refer to Naaman's specific miracle.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cystic fibrosis is defined as "An inherited disorder of the exocrine glands, usually developing during early childhood and affecting mainly the pancreas, respiratory system, and sweat glands. It is marked by the production of abnormally thick mucus by the affected glands, usually resulting in chronic respiratory infections and impaired pancreatic function."cystic fibrosis. (n.d.). *The American Heritage® Science Dictionary*. Retrieved February 14, 2009, from Dictionary.com website:

[http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/cystic fibrosis](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/cystic%20fibrosis). As a hospital chaplain in Connecticut, I was able to work with a number of young adults with cystic fibrosis and became very close with a young woman with the disease. It was an eye-opening, devastating, and redemptive experience for me.

^{iv} Williams, Bill, *Naked Before God: The Return of a Broken Disciple*, Morehouse Publishing, Harrisburg, PA, 1998, 41.

^v Williams, 189-190.

^{vi} Williams, 302.