Sermon for The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, July 7, 2019
Text: 2 Kings 5:1-14
Title: A softer way

I first met Seth about five years ago. An entrepreneur and engineer, he’d moved to San Francisco from the East Coast a few years earlier and found the home and community he hadn’t even realized he’d been looking for. He was the picture of health. Mid-fifties. Barely any wrinkles. A full head of hair. Fit and energetic. Quick to smile or offer a hand. One day early in our friendship, lunching on salads, he told me how he’d come west. After years as a high-powered executive in Boston - working eighty, ninety, one-hundred hour weeks - he’d finally burned out. He described himself as bitter and insatiable then, driven and capricious. He ate poorly and drank too much. He smoked and guzzled coffee. He couldn’t maintain a relationship. He slept poorly. And while work was, objectively, going well, he found himself increasingly exhausted and disillusioned.

By the time he received the offer that brought him to San Francisco, he was overweight and pre-diabetic, taking six prescription medicines a day to manage high blood pressure, cholesterol, asthma, and an assortment of other chronic ailments. He wasn’t entirely sure what was missing from his life, or why what had seemed to work for him for so long just wasn’t anymore, but he decided to see the move as a turning point, and figured, first things first, he needed to get his health in order. So, despite it seeming “very California” when a new colleague recommended a naturopath to him, he thought, “what do I have to lose?” and made an appointment.

His initial assessment took several hours and involved a detailed inventory of his habits and history. Blood was drawn and, in addition to the usual suspects he was screened for vitamin and mineral imbalances, food allergies, and a host of other alternative metrics. When the results came back, he spent a few more hours with the doctor going over everything, and left with a prescription for various herbs and supplements, teas, more sleep, a yoga regimen, a mindfulness meditation program, and an elimination diet of whole foods, with no alcohol, caffeine, gluten or dairy.
Within a few weeks, he had lost fifteen pounds and was sleeping more soundly than he had in years. Within a few months his blood pressure, cholesterol, blood sugar, and mood had all stabilized and he was able to go off every single one of his prescription medications. With all his new energy, he’d taken up swimming in addition to yoga, and had met his boyfriend at the gym where he worked out. Instead of eventually adding gluten, dairy, coffee, and wine back into his diet, Seth felt so good that he chose to stick to his new regimen. He got into therapy to more deeply explore how he’d gotten so off track, and now that he stuck diligently to forty hours in the office a week, he discovered hobbies like painting and gardening. He experienced a total transformation, one that clearly still surprised and delighted him, years later, as he oozed enthusiasm and gratitude for the health he’d come to enjoy.

I wonder if Naaman would have told a similar tale years after being cured of his leprosy - if he would have oozed enthusiasm and gratitude for the health he’d come to enjoy. Now in order to appreciate Naaman’s plight, we have to remember that leprosy was a terrible, disfiguring ailment in ancient times which, along with the telltale sores and legions, carried with it terrible stigma and shame. This was heightened by a culture and context where physical health and well-being were seen as indicative of one’s spiritual and moral fitness, and where the medicine man and the miracle man were one in the same. Lepers, it was generally assumed, must have done something unseemly to not only contract the disease but to have deserved it.

Now this might seem absurd to us today, but there’s real appeal in this kind of thinking. After all, if disease and illness and deformity come about because of something - some sin, infraction, or other indiscretion – then, theoretically, it can be remedied: just figure out what the transgression was and how to repent effectively. It gives one a sense of control. Surely the allure of a simple cause-and-effect explanation was especially attractive in a case like leprosy, which, though we know it today to be a highly treatable infection of the skin, was progressive and incurable in the ancient world, as it remains in places around the world today without access to modern medicine.

Whatever his symptoms, Naaman was leading a relatively normal life. He was, we are told, a mighty warrior, favored by his king, married, even the keeper of servants, one of whom had been captured from Israel and claimed a prophet from her homeland could cure him. There being no other option – no over the counter medications, no peer-reviewed protocol, no research-
based intervention - he sought the support of King Aram and set off with a proper introduction as well as a treasure trove of gold, silver, and fine garments to offer in exchange for his healing.

Arriving in Israel, he eventually finds his way to the home of Elisha, the prophet. Naaman pulls up with all the pomp and circumstance he can muster, clearly expecting something dramatic, at the very least and audience with this healer, but Elisha doesn’t even come out to meet him. Instead, he sends a messenger – rather impersonally – to instruct him to go was in the Jordan River seven times. That’s it. And Naaman is incensed! Wash in the river seven times? That’s all? No chanting and invoking? No ritualized singing or anointing? No magical words or powerful preaching? Just a dip in the local watering hole? Couldn’t he have washed in his own rivers, if that’s all it would take? And thought we can’t know for sure, he must also have thought bitterly about all the times he’d already tried to cleanse, to cure, to wash himself clean of this scourge, to no avail.

He is about to storm off, deeply offended, when his servant points out that he came here willing to do anything – to drink poison, submit to surgery, to work and sweat and bleed - if it would free him from this curse, and now, because the treatment was too simple, too easy, too out there, too unexpected, he is willing to throw the opportunity away. Naaman hears this wisdom and settles down, and instead of turning away he turns toward the Jordan, where he washes seven times, as instructed, and is entirely renewed. His flesh is restored like the flesh of a young boy.

Inherent in this story is a critique of the kinds of thinking that sees disease as moral impurity, the kind of thinking that lays the blame for illness at the feet of those who suffer. Naaman didn’t need to repent. He didn’t need to amend. He was, simply, sick, and incredibly lucky to be healed. It is a less dramatic, less satisfying interpretation, but probably closer to our own experience. After all, yes, there are things we can do for ourselves that generally make for health and healing – simple things, like those my friend Seth discovered: exercise, sleep, eating well, avoiding stimulants and depressants, honoring our unique biochemistry, asking for help, spending time in nature, caring for our bodies and our spirits and our souls. But these bodies, so strong and capable and miraculous, are also delicate ecosystems, vulnerable to wear and age and infection, none of which indicates laziness or indulgence or immorality. We might, in the midst of our own experiences of illness and distress, discover things in ourselves which we’d like to amend, but we’ve moved away from thinking of physical illness as divine retribution.
Or have we? Dr. Kate Bowler might wonder. Or at least she’d probably ask who I mean by “we.” Dr. Bowler, a professor of the history of Christianity at Duke Divinity School, is an expert on the prosperity Gospel, a widespread global phenomenon that insists that God wants good things like wealth, success, prestige, and health for us, and that these things will definitely, unfailingly come if we are being truly faithful. The flip side is an open insistence that those without wealth, success, prestige and health (that is, everyone at one point or another) are falling short. Their lack is, in short, their fault, which sounds a lot like the ancient world – a lot like Naaman’s context – to me.

While researching her 2013 book *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, Dr. Bowler visited dozens of Churches across the country that proudly espoused this theology, and became fascinated by the peculiarly American tendency to see tragedies as tests of character. And then, in 2015, at the age of 35, with a young son and a bright future, she was diagnosed with stage IV cancer. As it slowly became clear that she would live with this disease, though likely never be cured, her mailbox and inbox flooded with ever so unhelpful notes and letters from her prosperity Gospel friends, who insisted on telling her how to pray away the disease, how to repent and claim her blessing in order to re-claim her health.

She writes about this disorienting blame game in her bestselling memoir, *Everything Happens for a Reason, and Other Lies I’ve Loved*. It’s an unsettling read, because while Episcopalians have never embraced the prosperity gospel, it contains nuggets of folk wisdom that are pretty widespread, many of which we might surprise ourselves to realize we’re sympathetic to. For example, we might be adamant that no one should be shamed for being sick. On the other hand, we might agree - like Seth, like proponents of Functional Medicine, like so many in the Yoga / Fitness / Mindfulness world - that more of our health is in our control than we might have imagined not long ago, and that our thoughts and prayers and intentions have real power. Or we might agree that having modern medical care is helpful, life-giving, important. But we might also believe that our spiritual well-being is a part of our holistic health, and that entirely separating body from spirit is ultimately unhelpful.

It seems that so much of real life is lived in that in-between place, in the grey, and we are constantly discerning for ourselves, in the midst of our struggles and sickness and suffering, what we have control over and what, alarmingly, has control over us. So I’d like to lift up from Naaman’s story, and Seth’s, and Dr. Bowler’s, a bit of wisdom about the choices we’re presented
with when none of our choices are good. Naaman, we’re told, didn’t want to wade in the waters of the Jordan because it seemed too easy. Seth sought out treatment that many people see as soft, alternative, out there. And Kate had to defend her powerlessness over her illness in the face of people insisting she could simply choose health. Ultimately, the difference between the easy road and the hard road isn’t actually that clear in their stories, as is so often is the case in our own.

After all, going into the Jordan River – undressing, covered in legions and sores, probably in the company of a whole host of other people who were washing their laundry or their dishes or themselves in the same waters, surely used to the derision and disgust of strangers, in order to enter the murky river must have been, actually, incredibly hard for Naaman. He had to reveal himself, uncover himself, expose himself to the eyes and ire of others in order to be healed. Maybe that’s the real reason he resisted. And Seth – well, he chose an unconventional doctor, but I think we all know that shifting our habits, giving up foods and substances and indulgences we love, is incredibly hard. Harder than popping a pill or many other traditional treatments. And there was really nothing easy about Dr. Bowler’s wilderness. The terror and uncertainty. Having to learn to live with a chronic disease, to let go of the hope of remission or remedy. And that was, ultimately, the hardest thing for her – what others might think of as easy relative to the surgeries and chemo and radiation: learning to let go. Learning to trust that God does want good things for her, but that her suffering is not her fault, or a sign of God’s absence. On the contrary, though she of course wishes to be cancer-free, she oozes gratitude for the faith she and love she’s discovered in her dark night. For the grace and trust and comfort that came unbidden, over and over again, and sustained her through it all.

Sometimes the hard road is easy, and the easy road is hard, and when we find ourselves in just such a grey place, lost in the messy middle, we can remember that we’re in good company on a well-traveled road, and most importantly that we are not alone. We are held in a love that knows all things and restores all things, diagnosis or prognosis not withstanding: a love that draws us into wholeness and ultimately sees us home. Amen.