

"Simple Solutions."

2 Kings 5:1-14; Ps. 30; Mark 1:40-45

Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church

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In my family I am not known for finding the simple solution to anything! Everyone is convinced that I am a direct descendant of Rube Goldberg.

Now, some of our younger people may not know who Rube Goldberg was. That's ok. Imagine the game "Mousetrap" in which you have to build a elaborate mechanism just to have the cage come down on top of the mouse. Rube Goldberg was probably the inspiration for that game.

There are many reasons for wanting complex answers to simple problems. Sometimes we just love the thrill of the quest. Sometimes we think the word "simple" is too closely aligned with "simplistic" and so we go off searching for solutions that seem more worthy of our time or our temperament or our talents. Sometimes those offering so-called "simple" solutions are simply trying to scam us. Sometimes the solutions they offer are, in fact, too good to be true.

In today's Scripture readings we have two different approaches to a very complex issue. The issue was how to deal with leprosy.

The word "leprosy" covers a wide range of skin diseases in the Bible. Full-blown leprosy was known as the "living death". The disease caused horrible disfiguration and deformity as the nerve endings failed to respond to normal pain sensations. In addition to its devastating physical effects, leprosy caused terrible mental and spiritual suffering as one was shut out of the entire human community.

There was not much hope for a leper of Jesus' day. A common saying among the rabbis was: "It is easier to raise the dead than heal the

leper." The Law of Moses in Leviticus 13 & 14 offered no real help to the leper. Rather, it set up the boundaries to protect the rest of the community from them. The Law created very strict regulations. Here is where it gets complicated. For instance:

A leper could not enter a house. If they so much as stuck their head inside a house the house became unclean and was destroyed.

They could not come within 6 feet of anyone. They had to go bare-headed, wearing torn, ragged clothes with a covering over their upper lip to identify them as a leper. They had to call out a warning to anyone approaching them: "Unclean! Unclean!!"

Lepers were banished from the worshipping community and from their own families. They were the untouchables, the ones thought to be under God's own condemnation.

During the Middle Ages when someone was found to have contracted this disease the priest would lead them into the church and conduct the burial service liturgy over them. This made sense because, as far as the church and society was concerned, they were already dead.

In the eyes of the religious community and according to Moses' Law, lepers had to be isolated and cast out. They were as far from God as one could be, so they might as well be far from the community too. In fact, God's law required it.

One did not think to speak to a leper, much less touch one. Touching an unclean leper made one unclean as well. To have any contact with a leper would cause the weight of society's contempt and hatred and ostracism to fall upon oneself.

In today's story from Mark, Jesus is on a preaching tour in Galilee. He is interrupted by the approach of a leper who kneels before him. This leper has deliberately put Jesus in a very awkward position. He is a law breaker of the first order: he hasn't announced his presence; he has come too close for comfort and he has spoken out to one who is clean.

"If you will", he says to Jesus, "you can make me clean." There is no doubt in his mind about Jesus' ability to heal him, it's only a question of desire. Does Jesus want to make him clean?

In response to the question, Jesus says: "I do choose. Be made clean!" But more than just saying the words, Jesus also touches the man. Simple words, a simple act of touch, and a child of God is restored.

Our Old Testament Story about Naaman the leper begins with a simple solution to a complex problem. The servant girl from Israel knows that Elisha could heal her Master.

Following this revelation the King of Aram sends a letter to the king of Israel and, after some ceremonial clothes tearing, Naaman is on his way to the home of Elisha.

But Elisha doesn't even meet Naaman. He simply directs his servant to give Naaman the message of what he needs to do: Go and wash in the Jordan seven times.

As we heard in the story, Naaman was furious. He's an important man, a powerful man. He says: "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!"

Naaman thought he deserved the special treatment. His pride almost got in the way of his salvation. What Elisha offered was not only

insulting, it was too simple. Heading off in a huff, his servants head him off by appealing to reason: "It's a simple thing, this washing business. Just do it. Who knows, maybe your healing is more simple than you think"? So Naaman did it and he was restored.

Naaman's healing happened in spite of himself and his pride and happened largely on account of the people around him who saw that simple solutions could solve complex problems.

And so *God's* purposes unfold in surprisingly simple ways in these two stories which illustrate the breadth of *God's* compassion and care.

It's hard to find two more opposite representatives of those with whom we come in contact. On the one hand we have Naaman, the powerful, hated outsider, right hand man and victorious general for the king of the oppressive Aramaens. On the other we have the Jewish Leper, the most pitied member of the community who was on the lowest rung of the social ladder, powerless and poor.

In healing Naaman we are reminded that even the most hated enemy of *God's* chosen people can receive *God's* mercy and healing grace almost in spite of himself. With Jesus' healing of the leper, we are shown that the ones we have cast out and built social barriers to protect ourselves from are not cast away from *God's* presence and are as likely to receive *God's* compassion and love as we are.

All of this is part of the *Good News* of *God's* love in Christ.

Because, if the truth be told, we each know enough about ourselves to know that we ought to go around crying "Unclean! Unclean!" We know the secret sins of our hearts, the judgment we deserve for our unkind thoughts and hurtful deeds.

But the good news is that even to leprous sinners like us there is still a simple word of forgiveness and love if we would but hear it and believe it.

We too can look to Christ for healing, which may or may not come in visible ways, but certainly comes to our spirits and our souls when we receive the promise of salvation. We can trust that the one who said: "I do choose, be clean!" is still ready and able and anxious to make us whole and complete.

And then, like the healed leper in Mark's Gospel, like Naaman newly minted and washed clean in the Jordan, we too could proclaim the good news that God is "for us" and stands ready and able to set us free.

Then we could set aside our fears and to reach out with a word of acceptance and love to those we so easily regard as worse sinners than ourselves.

Friends, we can be healers in our own relationships, our homes, our places of employment, our community. If we look, we will find wounds and wounded souls everywhere. And I know that we, in the name of Jesus, can bring some healing balm, some word of hope, some act of love and caring, some prayer of possibility into the woundedness of those around us.

When we do, we participate in Christ's healing ministry and make his presence come alive in us and in the world around us.

It doesn't require Rube Goldberg on our evangelism committee. It isn't complicated. It's simple. Really. Amen.