

Health-to-Go (Lk17:11-19; 2Kgs5:1-3,7-15c)
13Oct19

What are we doing here? Where do we go from here? And where do we place ourselves in this reading? It makes a difference for our expectations of what is happening here.

These stories of course don't directly fit our dividing lines as transferable to our setting. There's the place of institutional religion, where priests operate and prayers and gratitude and devotion may be offered and things can be set right.

But Jesus is not in the place of religion. Neither was the prophet Elisha. So the people in these stories looking for healing didn't go to the institution. They didn't go to the priests. Even though we usually consider this our place of institutional religion, that might not be the equivalent encounter in the stories.

To make it one notch more complex, the church is not our parallel institution, by and large. Our place of medical healing—our institution—is the hospital or clinic. And the priests of the institution to pronounce who is well are the doctors or nurses. But, again, the story doesn't have healing from the institutionalized professionals. It has Jesus.

That points us back here. Maybe we can ignore church as institution, and not focus on the so-called religious professionals (which is part of why I try to come across as pretty unprofessional). Maybe this is the place to bump into Jesus and be surprised by an unexpected word of blessing and healing.

Before we hear that word of blessing and healing, though, let's pay attention to what we're listening for. Neither Elisha nor Jesus has a stethoscope or MRI machine. They prescribe neither surgery nor pills. That's not what Jesus needed to diagnose as the way to get healthy.

I'm going to try to draw a foggy line here by saying Jesus shows God is not most concerned about your illness or disease; God is most concerned about you. That's a tough contrast because in many cases a sickness or health

problem feels like the biggest worry, the thing you'd most like to have addressed or resolved.

In this distinction, it's not that Jesus is ignoring or doesn't care about your illness. But he doesn't treat it in isolation or as superseding everything else.

In faith, we recognize health and healing as a matter of wholeness, not a matter of cure. Jesus isn't isolating illness as if that's all there is to you, as if what's wrong has taken over everything about you. It's not just treating an injury or removing germs or patching up parts. You're not the sum of your vital signs or test results. Jesus is addressing the whole of you. He's not saving you just *from* a single thing; he's saving you *for* life.

I have heard some of you say while you're sick that you don't only want to be treated as sick, don't want to be identified only by cancer, don't want to be known for the problem, don't want your relationships restricted to revolving around receiving for a small set of needs.

That's what this sense of wholeness is about from God in Jesus, that you may have life and have it abundantly. It's more than a doctor checking on a surgical follow-up. It's how all of your life goes.

I know some health problems can be all-consuming, and our culture tries convincing us to expect we ought to be totally cured, and that's what's right. We do pray for those specifics, for direct relief, for successful procedures. We celebrate fine-tuned laparoscopic skill attending to the precise details, the science and wisdom for better alleviating pains and hurts.

But even when you're not sick, it fosters such a narrow view of health and life—that food is only for balancing nutrients and counting calories, that exercise is for cardiovascular gain, that you need the right amount of this and not too much of that, and have to follow the rules and you'll keep yourself right and then be fortunate enough to stay alive.

But this Jesus-model of fullness of life is sometimes embodied for us by those who can't be cured, whose ailment may never change, who may even end up dying (just as all of us eventually

will), but who are still vibrantly engaging life and know who they are.

Again, to draw a distinction: this isn't about putting on a happy face even when you're miserable and feeling rotten. It's not about pretending nothing's wrong. Our God of compassion is suffering with you. When things aren't going well, I cry with you. That is our community responding with assistance, just as Sarah Key mentioned, so much that she wouldn't wish away her ankle injury.

That also leads us to note that not everything is ever wrong. There is more to life, and there will be still more to come. Even in the worst, you are beloved by God and held by God and sustained in God's promise. You are worthwhile to community. You are you.

The ten lepers in the story had a very particular version of this. Sure, their skin disease was problematic. But it may not have been all that much physical suffering. It may have been itchy ringworm or flaky psoriasis, which qualified among these skin diseases in this category.

The larger issue was that they were identified and entirely confined by the term "leprosy." They had no other interaction with society besides being defined as lepers. They couldn't work. They couldn't live in town. They couldn't go up to others and have a conversation. They had to call out from a distance with the disparaging yell, "Unclean! Unclean!" Imagine being required to claim that awful label for yourself! Being defined as wrong. They were quarantined from life's goodness.

The healing, the wholeness, the salvation, the restoration from Jesus, then, is more than fresh unblemished skin. It's the opportunity to interact in life and in relationships. This, and not mere remediation of medical maladies, is God's intention.

That's highlighted further that this is the God of all creation. So certainly the search for healing and wholeness won't stop at national boundaries or be limited to the preferred insiders, but is exemplified by expanding to include enemy Syrian generals and heretical Samaritans, those

who would be rejected as having no business receiving good from God or knowing God or praising God. Jesus' mission will not allow anybody to be left out. It includes the the ill and immigrants, the unfaithful and the unkind, the proudly pretentious and the desperate and unknowing. We are all held in God's intention for abundant life.

So God meets us sometimes not with showiness or miracles. It turns out miracles are too small for this big purpose. God comes with remarkable restoration and reassurance, with words of blessing and healing. This isn't the fancy latest expensive technocratic highly-researched procedure. It can be a simple unspectacular washing in water, maybe like the small splash of this font that incorporates you by baptism into this caring community. Maybe it's the spoken reminder that—of course!—God in Christ wants fullness of life for you, that just as it's not ultimately dependent on your genes or your physical regimen or your attitude or your insurance plan, neither is it allotted in proportion to your faith. Your abundant God lavishes this gift of life on you and all creation. It may later be the whispering word that wakes you from the big nap, calling you into a new day of life, even beyond the grave, calling you to come out, blown along by the Spirit into a fresh breath of air.

Today it's simply in the word "Go." You have come today to this place not for medical diagnosis, not for small miracles, but to find an encounter with Jesus, to see how he addresses you and your needs. And his word is "Go." Go back to life. Go live. Go be in relationships. Go into the world. Go away from the confines of culture and the limiting sense of illness. Go away from the identity that you did it wrong, that you need to do something else, that you should be different. Go. Just go and be. Go and do what you will. Go live in the world. Go experience God's intentions.

Nine of the lepers heard that commission and they went, went off to live at last. One remained to supplement it with some praise and thanks to Jesus.

At this point, you too can listen to Jesus, sending you back into life. For some, that may be enough, that you got what you came for, and you can go on your way today and live. I mean that as an honest offer, for sure. Others may need more time, to give thanks or to pray and encounter Jesus and interact with God about illness and health and wholeness and life. Whichever is right for you today is what's right.

I realize there's a risk 90% of you might get up now and leave, that you listen to Jesus and Go. But finishing the service—the institutional rule-following with a religious professional—isn't what's important. It's not the point. Just as we're not here for minute medical management, we're also not here for the religious institution. All this is always only in service of life, so that you can know God's work is that you and all people and all creation may live.

So you can stay. Or, in the words of our commission from Jesus, you can “get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”