

A Race For The Imperishable Prize

*Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath. But we an imperishable one.”
I Corinthians 9:25.*

The rich young ruler missed “It.” The first thief on the cross missed it. Herod, Pilate and many of the religious leaders of that day did not understand it. John the Baptist had doubts about it. And, Peter did not understand it at first. Yet, Mary, the centurion at the cross and the two men on the road to Emmaus got it. And, you must get “it” as you search for your next rector.

I once saw a picture in the early sixties called “The Robe.” In it, there had been two kinds of healing. One was about the boy little Jonathan who was shown to the Centurion while playing kick ball with the children of the neighborhood. Jonathan had been physically healed of having been born with clubbed feet. The other was Mariam the singer who was still crippled. Mariam too had been healed by God. Her healing was a healing of the spirit where she was left to sing God’s praises and to let others who were disabled know that they too could praise God for his wonderful healing power.

I. A Commander of Syria’s Army Finally Got “It”-I Kings 5:1-14

In Syria, centuries before Christ, there was a different attitude about leprosy and illness than in Israel. Lepers were not ostracized from the community. Naaman was the commander of the army of Ben-Hadad, King of Syria, despite the fact that he had leprosy. He also was not banned from his own household. A captured slave Girl in Naaman’s house told her mistress that Naaman could be healed by a prophet that lived in Israel. So, Naaman went to Ben-Hadad and the king of Syria sent him for healing to King Joram of Israel with ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten festal garments worth \$80,000. King Joram was frightened and thought that Ben-Hadad had done that to pick a fight with him and with his country. However, The prophet Elisha told King Joram to send Naaman to him. So Naaman was sent to Elisha’s house.

Elisha did not go out to greet him, refused to take his money and relayed a message that Naaman was to go wash himself in the Jordan river seven times. Naaman was indignant. How dare this lowly prophet not give him an audience and to tell him to wash in the muddy Jordan when the rivers in Syria were crystal clear and beautiful? What was the prophet thinking? Why, he should have come out to Naaman, wave his hand in the air and magically heal him at once. Here, we observe an arrogance of power and privilege. It took one of Naaman’s servants to convince the commander to do what the prophet had directed. And so Naaman, the commander of Ben-Hadad’s army washed himself in the river Jordan and was completely cured of his leprosy. Some possible insights about this story later.

II. A Leper Who Apparently Did Not Get It-Mark 1:40-45

Shortly after Jesus left Simon Peter’s mother-in-law’s house and after his meditation in a desert place, he was encountered by a leper who knelt down before him and demanded to

be healed. Jesus healed him, warning him to tell no one what had happened and to go show himself to a priest with the appropriate offering. The leper was instantaneously healed, went to see the priest and then went out and told everybody he could find what had happened. From then on, Mark said that Jesus had to conduct his ministry out in the country where crowds of people came out to hear him.

If you look at the Greek words, there is a strange tone in today's gospel. Our translation said that Jesus was moved with pity. But rather than pity or compassion, Jesus was peeved with the leper. His command for him to tell no one was spoken in a stern tone as well. One has to ask, "Why was that the case?" More about this later.

III. Paul Admonished The Christians in Corinth to get "It"-I Cor. 9:24-27

In the epistle, Paul used an analogy about the disciplines and rewards of an athlete as compared with the discipline and reward in God's kingdom. Just as an athlete punished and disciplined his body in order to excel in athletics, so too the Christian had to be disciplined and restrained in his/her life. The difference lay in the end results. The athlete competed for a perishable crown of lilies or laurel, whereas the Christian race was for the imperishable crown of eternal life. The Lenten season is about that kind self discipline.

IV. Some Possible Insights Into Getting "It"-Seeing With The Eyes Of Faith

So there we have it, the lessons in a synopsis. On the surface, we have two healing stories and Paul's comparison about runners in the Christian race. We could have explored the miraculous healing. However, you know about those. You have heard hundred of discussions and examples of healing. No doubt you have sought healing or have been spiritually healed yourself. Rather than that, I have chosen to invite you behind the scenes to something which I believe is more helpful to our understanding of the kingdom of God; and perhaps may give you some insight into what to expect in looking for your next rector.

A. In the story about Naaman, please observe that the good news about the source of healing was not to be found in the power of kings, the wealth of the privileged, the scenic beauty of crystal rivers or in the exhibition of a masterful ceremony.

It was a slave girl who told her mistress about a prophet in Israel who could heal her master. Additionally, It was Naaman's slave who convinced his master to submit to the instructions of the prophet and wash seven times in the Jordan river. So the information about where there was power for healing came from the most humble of places-a servant girl and the servant of the commander of the Syrian army. Then too, healing was not to be found in the clean waters of the Abana or Pharpar rivers of Syria, but in the muddy waters of the Jordan river. And, healing was not to be conducted by the impressive ritual expected by Naaman, but by humility and obedience to the command of the prophet.

Another insight comes from the change in Naaman. The leper crossed over the Jordan into God's territory and life for him was different from then on. Later on in the story, you will find that Naaman became an Israelite in spirit. He took some of the sacred soil of the

Holy land back with him. Upon this sacred soil, he prayed to Yahweh for forgiveness and cleansing every time he had to go with Ben-Hadad into the temple of the false god Rimmon.

So for me, this miracle was not just the cleansing of the leper, but about the faith, power and healing found in the words of two servants, obedience to the prophet and in the muddy waters of the Jordan river, as a conduit of God's grace. Many times, we do not receive what we pray for because we are not willing to submit ourselves to what is required by God. God does the healing. The healing may come in one or two forms. But, to God, belongs the glory.

B. In the Gospel story about the healing of the leper, the insight for me is that Jesus's discomfort with the leper might have been about our human tendency to try to put new wine in old wineskins. And, no doubt it reflected Jesus' inner struggles with being a miracle working versus proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God.

The leper might have seen Jesus only as a miracle worker. His asking for healing might have been a demand for healing. His only concern might have been just a desire to be restored to the fellowship of the synagogue. In order to do that once he was healed, he needed only to be examined by the priest, to give an offering at the temple and be pronounced clean. Jesus, no doubt knew that the leper, unlike Naaman in our previous story, would have been left spiritually at the same place before he was healing. We do know that at the end of this process, we never hear anything about this former leper ever following Jesus. Just because God does something wonderful for us does not necessarily mean that we will worship him.

In addition, the anger or discomfort of Jesus was no doubt due to the struggle he had all of his ministry. The comment last week was, *"And Simon and those who were with him pursued him, and they found him and said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' (One has to ask, 'Why is that?') And he said to them, 'Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out,'" Mark 1:36-38.* We also know that one of the three temptations at the baptism of Jesus was for him to be just a miracle worker. And we are aware that one of the greatest temptations for us in the church is to think that religion or worship are only about God's doing our will rather than our doing the will of God.

C. If we take the interpretative mode about the two healings, then Paul's running analogy indicates to us that there are two ways of looking at the role of religion. There is a worldly way in which we view religion as the world sees it-in terms of success, power, riches, fame, fading beauty or of God catering to our needs. For such observers, it is about power, ceremony and winning at all costs. King Ben-Hadad thought that he can buy God's healing. Naaman wanted the prophet to pay deference to him and to perform some magical ceremony. And, the leper looked at religion as a means of healing himself on his terms and for his restoration to the temple fellowship. I pray that this will not be your desire as you look for and select your next rector.

On the other hand, we can look at religion the way God would have us to do. Religion is about the growth of the kingdom of God, here on earth and in the Age to come. Our spiritual roles are to believe in God, to trust in God and to follow God wherever God leads the way. That is to get "It."

Our lessons this morning remind us that bad things happen to good people. That is simply the way it is. People are tragically killed. Disease is a fact of life, victimizing the just and unjust alike. And, there are many things that we do not understand and that are not under our control. It behooves us then to keep the faith, pray to God for ourselves and for others, accept what God graciously gives us and to support one another in sickness and in health; to love and to cherish until we are parted by death. That is to get “It.”

My personal story! (A 4-mm polyp near gallbladder 6-month ago. Gone today!)

I leave you with these esoteric words, “Do not overlook an orchid while searching for a Rose!” Open your eyes and see God’s presence among you. Open your ears and hear God word to you. Open your minds and follow where God’s leads the way.

Let us pray. Lord, help us in the midst of things we do not understand, to love, trust and worship you with all of hearts and all of our souls and all of our strength. Amen.

See also the sermon that would have been preached but for the surprise:

[http://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermons that work 104661 ENG HTM.htm](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermons%20that%20work%20104661%20ENG%20HTM.htm)