

“Chains and Words” Jon Ask

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c, Luke 17:11-19

Good morning, I have to start with a disclaimer. Being both my father’s son and a religion major, I have a tendency to get a little long winded in these types of talks. I’ll try to keep the sermon under a few hours but in case I really get out of control, feel free to throw something at me, preferably something soft...or edible. Ok before I waist any more time let’s get started by taking a closer look at the Biblical texts for the day. In these readings we encountered two instances of people being healed of leprosy. I have titled my sermon, “chains and words” after two of the themes that I found in these stories. As we go through the stories again, think about how the characters are “chained” and how the “word” functions in the narrative.

In the first story we meet Naaman, a great man and commander of an army who suffers from leprosy. One day word is brought to Naaman of the prophet in Samaria and suddenly Naaman has hope of finding an end to his suffering. So Naaman calls up the king of Israel, of course this is long before phonebooks so it is unclear exactly how he got the king’s number. Historians disagree on the subject but I think he probably just found it on facebook. Anyway the king of Israel is not real thrilled about having Naaman, this mighty warrior for Aram, come to his country. But Elisha the prophet has something else in mind. “Let him come” he says, “then he will see that there is a prophet in Israel.” So Naaman shows up at Elisha house but he doesn’t come alone, he “came with his horses and chariots.” Who brings a bunch of horses and chariots with them when they go to the doctor? Essentially, Naaman shows up and says, “What can I say? I’m kind of a big deal.” Elisha will have none of it. He doesn’t even come to the door but sends a messenger out and tells Naaman, “You want your flesh to be healed and to become clean? I’ll tell you how to become clean, go take a bath.” Needless to say Naaman was not happy. He says and I quote, “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? He turned and went away in a rage.” Personally I can’t really blame him, I would be upset too if I traveled all the way to Israel to see a prophet and all he told me was to *take a bath!* Luckily, Naaman’s servants save the day. “If the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it?” they asked, “How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash, and be clean?’” So Naaman went down to the river and washed, “according to the *word* of the man of God” and he was restored and made clean. Our story ends with Naaman returning to the man of God and saying, “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel.”

Let’s think back now to the themes I mentioned before. How was Naaman bound by chains? Certainly we could say that his leprosy was something that bound him, something that he wanted to be free from. But was he not also bound by his pride? It seems to me that this text is as much about pride as it is about leprosy. Naaman comes to Elisha *expecting* to be healed. “I thought that for *me* he would surely come out” he says. Naaman, expecting a miraculous sign or an intricate ritual is not fond of the idea of humbling himself and listening to the prophet’s

command. It seems to me that this is a story not only of freedom from physical illness but also of pride.

What about words? What role do they play? I think there are two key phrases in this story, the promise of freedom as Elisha says, “wash and be clean” and the response of faith that is created by that promise, “now I know.” The words proclaim, demand, and create both faith and action. Naaman hears the words and believing them, washes and is healed. It is through the words that Naaman is set free and faith is created.

Alright on to the next story, in the reading form Luke we find Jesus on his way to Jerusalem when ten lepers show up shouting, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” Instead of healing them on the spot, Jesus tells them to go show themselves to the priests. So the lepers go and as they go they are made clean. At this point, nine of the lepers disappear from the scene. This is not all that unexpected, after all Jesus did command them to go show themselves to the priests, which they have not yet done. One, however, returns praising God and thanking Jesus. The story ends as Jesus says to the one, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

What are the chains in this story? Again leprosy is a part of it but like in Naaman’s story, is there more going on here? What did the lepers really mean when they asked Jesus to “have mercy on them?” For the nine, physical healing which would free them from being outcasts seems to be what they sought. When they were healed they probably went right to the priest so they could be declared clean and welcomed back into society. But why did the one return? Did he simply have better manners than the other nine? Or was he given a different kind of freedom? It is interesting to note that all ten were made clean but only the one who returns is said to have been “made well.” All ten found healing in Jesus words but it meant something different for the one. As a foreigner, he may have been less interested in returning to his place in the community. For him the healing did not just restore him to his old life. It opened up the possibility for a whole new life, a life with this man, Jesus, who has the power to speak and make clean, to heal and give freedom. So the one returns and he bows at Jesus’ feet and gives thanks.

As in Naaman’s story, we see words healing and setting free. Again we have the initial promise of freedom followed by the response of praise but unlike Naaman’s story this does not end with the words of praise. In this story Jesus has the last words. He commands, “get up and go on your way” and proclaims, “your faith has made you well.” The words not only heal and set free but give identity and direction.

Well, no one has thrown anything at me yet so I’ll take that as a good sign but by this point your internal dialog may sound something like this. “Ok Jon you may be a religion major and find all this textual analysis stuff incredibly interesting, but that’s about enough for me. How does this apply to us today?” Well for the record, I do find this very interesting. Partially because I’m just that much of a nerd but also because I think it *does* apply to us and thinking about what is going on in these stories is essential to hearing what they have to say to us. So what *are* these texts saying? Are they the equivalent to a Biblical infomercial? Clear up that bothersome skin disease in just 7 easy steps! Brought to you by the Jordan River Company, call now while supplies last! Personally, I think that misses the point. These stories are showing us people who were chained

and who have been set free. If you have chains in your life, then these stories are about you. And in my experience, chains seem to keep showing up in life as long as one has a pulse.

As a student and a young adult I struggle with pride and selfishness just like the lepers in the texts. I just want to have life all figured out, to have the right answers. And truthfully that is what the world expects of me. In classes I am expected to understand the concepts, learn the right answers and to be able to clearly articulate all this in the proper format. Whether it be APA, MLA, GPA or NBA or however those acronyms go. And of course, the dreaded question relentlessly haunts me, “What are your plans for the future? What are you going to do with your life?” I have never really had a *good* answer to these questions. I have never known exactly how to respond but even as I am asked these questions I ask them of myself. I *wish* I knew exactly where my life was headed. I *wish* I had a strong sense of identity. I *wish* I knew what it looks like to be a faithful Christian in a post-modern world. I *wish* I had the answers to all the questions of life and faith that seem to pile up faster than homework assignments in college. There is a part of me that thinks it would be nice if I did have all the answers and could stand up here today and “tell you how it is.” But there is something else inside of me that tells me that is not what my story is about, that there is more to reality than what I *wish*. I think there is more to living than my pride and selfish desires. I think there is more to life’s greatest questions than the simple answers I often desire. However, that does not change the fact that I want to know, that I want to have everything figured out and that I want to be in control. I am *bound* to these things. When it comes down to it, I often don’t want God to be God because that would mean admitting that I am not in control, I don’t have all the answers, and I am not God. It turns out that I don’t want God to be God because I want to be God. *Those* are my chains.

I can’t say where any of you are today or what your lives are like but if your experience has been anything like mine, I suspect that you know what the chains are in your life. You know what burdens your soul and holds you captive. If you are like me, you know that these chains do not easily go away but seem to keep popping up unexpectedly just when we think we are finally free. I have found that while I am very good at convincing myself I am God, the world is even better at showing me I am not and that is one of the most humbling experiences one can have. I have found that it is precisely at that moment of brokenness and humility that I can most clearly see that I am in need of God, that I am in need of a Savior.

If you find yourself in that place, broken, hurt, confused, chained, then I have words for you today. There is a savior named Jesus and as He said to the leper, so He says to you, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” Amen.

“The Benediction” by Jimmy Needham

I tried Lord
I tried Lord
I tried hard to be Your good little boy
Chin up, head high
All zeal and no joy
Thinking all my good deeds could please Jesus

Boy, was I wrong
Though I knew the right songs, all my cymbals and gongs played the melodies wrong
And it wasn't long 'til I saw my disease
A life spent wanting to please
On hands and knees
To make right, to appease
God help me please
This can't be Christianity, it can't be
The whole thing's like insanity
Where's the rest of eternal security?
Where's the hope of a God big enough to cope with all my hang-ups and insecurities?
Certainly this isn't breathing
My chest burning and heaving
It's like my pulse is ceasing
Like my heart quits beating
Yet this I recall to mind and therefore I have hope:
You died, Lord
You died, Lord
Assuredly, like the coming of the dawn, the Father's love song goes on
Drowning out my bitter songs
And breaking through walls and barriers
Christ swoops in, removes sin, picks up His bride and carries her
So I can sing in agreement with the King this thing:
There's only one thing that pleases the Father
The God-man on the tree in the midst of the scoffers
Now I finally see that Christ is what Christ offers
And I'm finally free in the love of the Father