

Sermon on 20PentecostC, II Kings 5 (primary) and Luke 17:11-19 (secondary)
Preached at Custer Lutheran Fellowship on October 14, 2007, by Pastor David Van Kley

PULLING STRINGS

What is it that ails you? That tears away at the fabric of your **self**, keeping you from the wholeness God promises? My assumption today is that for all of us there is **something**. Something that gnaws away at our bodies and hearts and minds and souls.

Every day, on TV and the internet, commercial messages tout miracle products guaranteed to do amazing things for us. Some of these commercials are downright embarrassing. Now, I know that I'm a man, but one that has appealed to me recently promises to remove wrinkles from skin. To a guy racing through mid-life at a pace which seems much too fast, that sounded good, so I bought some. (Apply some to my face.) I'm getting old and I don't want to. That's one thing that ails **me**. There, are the wrinkles gone yet?

What ails **you**? Is it the battle of the bulge, the roll of fat that stubbornly clings to your midsection, no matter how hard you try to rid yourself of it? Is it arthritis that follows you around as predictably as a shadow in the sun? Allergies that make you itch and water and sneeze? High blood pressure and bad cholesterol? The skin lesion that might be another basal cell carcinoma? The x-rays that refuse to lie about the silent invasion going on inside you?

What **is** it that ails you? The way your friends treat you at school? Chronic worry which robs you of joy? Depression? Fear? Anger bottled up inside you like carbonated pop. I'm pretty sure there is **something** this morning, something which would cause you to cry out for healing if you saw any reason to hope. Something that ails you.

The thing that ailed people in today's Scripture lessons was **leprosy**, the name given to a variety of skin diseases which were usually degenerative and sometimes life-threatening. They were also highly contagious and so led to quarantine, forcing isolation upon the sufferer. Like cancer, leprosy played no favorites, affecting wealthy and poor, Jew and Gentile. Worst of all, there was no cure.

We don't have the time to dwell on both of today's leprosy stories, so let's settle on the first one, the story of Namaan, commander of the army of Aram. Namaan was a "great man," according to the text, a fellow who could pull all the strings. Maybe he was something like Governor Janklow used to be in South Dakota: when he said he wanted something, people gave it to him. Perhaps they feared the consequences if they didn't.

But when he was diagnosed with leprosy, there were no strings for Namaan to pull. That is, **until** his slave girl, a child he'd captured during one of his raids into the land of Israel, gave him an idea. "There's a prophet in Israel with power to cure leprosy!" she announced. The moment Namaan heard that, he began pulling strings. He got in touch with his King, the King of Aram and asked him to write a letter to the King

of Israel, which scared the dickens out of **that** King. But finally Namaan got what he wanted—directions to the house of Elisha, the prophet of God. He drove up to the place in his chariot, with his fleet of horses, entourage of servants, and a string of wagons piled high with “gifts.” It must have been quite a sight, this foreign general with all his stuff, parked in front of a small house in the backcountry, trying to buy healing from a dread disease. (Although some people may still try that, at places like the Mayo Clinic!)

Anyway, Namaan expected the red carpet treatment from the prophet. But he didn’t get it. Elisha made him wait. At first, no one answered his summons. Finally, a messenger approached and said, “Go, wash in the Jordan River seven times and you’ll be clean.” That was all. Which infuriated Namaan! “I came all this way! Surely you’d think that for **me**—a great man of Aram—the prophet would come out in person and stand and call on the name of his God and wave his hand over the spot and cure the leprosy! The Jordan River! What is it but a muddy little creek! We have way bigger and better rivers back home!” Fuming, he got back into his chariot and drove away.

Namaan’s rage revealed an inner infection worse than the leprosy. If the leprosy fed on his skin, a need for recognition fed on his soul. He had to be in control. He had to pull the strings. He could not tolerate being “dissed” by a lowly prophet. He was willing even to sacrifice the chance of a cure for the sake of his pride!

The “great man” wouldn’t have been cured at all, if it were not for his lowly servants, who chased after him until they caught up and said, “Look, boss. If he’d asked you to climb Mt. Everest, wouldn’t you have done it, boss? Wouldn’t you have? Would it be **so** tough to take a bath in the Jordan River?”

In the end, Namaan listened. He immersed himself seven times and was miraculously cured of leprosy. Still, he wasn’t healed on the inside until he showed up back at Elisha’s house in a different mood and made a confession of faith, the confession that God alone has the power to heal.

What ails you? There are many cures out there. Hypnosis and massage and relaxation. **Dermatologists**, **Neurologists**, **Oncologists**. **Rheumatologists**. Pills, supplements, and surgery. Match the right treatment to the right condition and all of these can affect a cure. All are gifts of God for which we can give thanks and praise.

But none of them finally can heal you of the ailment that lies deeper than your skin or even than your vital organs. The sickness of your very **being**. Your separation from the God who made you and from your sisters and brothers of every race and clan. Separation, finally, from **yourself**—the person you were made to be. The sickness of sin.

Just as Namaan had **his** servants, so let me be **your** servant today, to point you the waters of healing. To simple waters that flow from the tap, in which you are invited to bathe three times in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Sounds

simple, I know. **Too** simple. Almost laughable. But there is power in that water and those words. The power of God. Power to restore a human being.

And the best part is, that almost to a person, we've already been washed clean in the waters of baptism. So it is only a matter of claiming again that which already ours, that we **are** whole, despite our brokenness. We **are** healed despite our illnesses. We **are** accepted despite our sins. We **are** God's despite our wandering. We **are**. Not even the big C—cancer—can destroy us because we are in the hands of a **bigger C**—Christ Jesus our Lord.

Earlier, I said that Namaan was a man who knew how to pull all the strings. He shaped his life as if it were a puppet show and he could force others to do exactly what he wanted. He was healed when he discovered that that wasn't true, that there was a God in Israel and it wasn't him. That he couldn't have everything his way. And that it was best to listen to what people said, even people of a lower social standing. **Especially** people of a lower social standing, because in their words one often hears the word of God.

The image of a puppeteer pulling all the strings no longer applied to Namaan, nor does it apply to a baptized child of God. Instead of being people who pull all the **strings**, we are like someone pulling out all the **stops!** Think of an organist sitting before a great instrument, an instrument she did not make, an instrument that does not belong to her, in a theatre filled with people she does not know. An intimidating situation! Yet, she plays with confidence, pulling out all the stops, trusting the **instrument** to make amazing music through her small hands. Even the best organist makes mistakes. But those mistakes are lost in the rhythm and beauty of the song.

So are we to live. Amen!