

The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B, 2012
Mark 1: 40-45
The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

Once again, as we follow St. Mark's Gospel, we hear the story of another healing miracle. This morning's gospel reading tells us that our lord healed a leper. In the Old Testament reading, Naaman, a great Syrian general of the ancient world, was the recipient of a healing miracle. The man was a leper. His leprosy, too, was cast aside.

In our time, some have great difficulty with the biblical stories of miraculous healings. I don't. I have no difficulty with the story of the lepers being healed. I believe that it happened exactly as St. Mark says that it did. But, the healing miracles and nature miracles are not the essence of the Scriptures and they should not be the essence of our faith. Far more important than a healing miracle or a nature miracle is the healing of a corrupted soul. But if miracles are not the essence of the good news of Jesus Christ, they certainly point to that good news, which is that God loves us, and God is actively involved in our lives.

Nevertheless, we should not get hung up on the miracle stories. Today's gospel reading speaks not nearly so much about faith healing as it does about faith itself. Hear me. In two Scriptural accounts this morning, the Old Testament story and the Gospel, it is not the healing that is important. What is important is the faith of the lepers. In the Gospel, a leper came to Jesus. He said, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Note the nature of the statement. The leper did not say, "Can you make me clean?" He knew that Jesus could heal him. He had faith in Jesus.

What is this faith that defies logic? The best answer I can give you is the ancient answer of the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, found in the New Testament. The unknown author of that epistle gave this definition of true Christian faith. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Some things must be intuitively known because of repeated experiences of a loving God. Those who truly know Jesus trust in his righteousness and his justice. Our faith is not a blind expectation that Jesus will give us what we want. Rather, it is a sure and certain knowledge that God the Father loves us, that God the Son died for us, and that God the Holy Spirit is with us in all things. We are never separated from God's love. Faith understands that there is a purpose for living and that purpose is somehow based upon the just and righteous will of God. Faith understands that God is reconciling the world to himself, through his Son, and that as baptized Christians; we are caught up in and have a place in that very reconciling process.

People of faith understand that things do not always work out the way that we would like them to, and that every prayer for miraculous intervention does not end with a miraculous intervention. In the Gospel, today, Jesus might very well have responded to the leper's statement, "If you choose to, you can make me clean," by saying "I know I can cleanse you, but I won't." It might very well be that God's purpose does not include such an

intervention. Faith simply places the self in the arms of God, knowing that God's love prevails and that God's will is always an expression of his perfect love. If we suffer unjustly in this world, nevertheless we keep the faith, because we know that God's love transcends earthly suffering.

Christian disciples model themselves on Jesus. Christians are mindful that on the night that our Lord was betrayed, he went into the garden to pray. His prayer was very pointed. He knew that he was going to be killed. He prayed, "Father, if it is your will, let this cup pass." Jesus was a young man, a righteous man and a man of faith who did not want to die. "Father," he said, "let this cup pass. Nevertheless, let your will, not mine be done." Shortly thereafter, the soldiers came and took him away for trial and crucifixion. Death by crucifixion is a very torturous death. Yet, in the excruciating pain and suffering, even in the moment of death, Jesus did not lose faith. And, through his life and death, God's will was done, a will manifested perfectly in the Resurrection.

We, who by dying to self share in Christ's death, also share in his Resurrection. Sharing in his Resurrection, we know that we shall inherit the Kingdom. So, with Christ at our side, we walk trustingly in life, knowing that in all things our Lord is with us. We are never separated from his love. *Amen.*