

SERMON FOR ORDINARY 28C  
ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD

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"When life gives you lemons, make lemonade" is a phrase we may be common with. It is a proverbial phrase used to encourage optimism and a positive can-do attitude in the face of adversity or misfortune. The phrase was supposedly coined by Christian anarchist writer Elbert Hubbard in a 1915 obituary he penned and published for dwarf actor Marshall P. Wilder. The obituary, entitled The King of Jesters, praises Wilder's optimistic attitude and achievements in the face of his challenges:

"He was a walking refutation of that dogmatic statement, *Mens sana in corpore sano*. His was a sound mind in an unsound body. He proved the eternal paradox of things. He cashed in on his disabilities. He picked up the lemons that Fate had sent him and started a lemonade-stand."

Both the main characters in our stories today could testify to that truth. And so could all of us. You never know when life will give you lemons.

For Naaman and the Leper(s) in the Gospel story, they too had seemed to be given lemons. Their lemons were leprosy. The question is, were they going to make lemonade?

Although separated by thousands of years, these two stories have quite a bit in common and, as we consider them, we will be able to see where our lives intersect with them too.

Both readings depict people desperate for healing. Both stories deal with the dreaded disease called leprosy, a generic term that covered all kinds of skin disorders. Both men, because of their illness, were subject to laws that isolated them from others. In both stories frustration is expressed. In both stories healing occurs.

But there are significant differences between these two stories too, differences that highlight once again that the spirit of God is uncontainable, endlessly varied and beyond our control.

Control was what Naaman was used to. As a very important army commander he was used to calling the shots, so to speak. He commanded, others obeyed, so when illness entered his life he floundered. This was something he had no control over. We can all relate to that because we have all, to a lesser or greater extent, experienced suffering. It is part of the human experience. “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade”. Whether it be an illness or other circumstances beyond our control suffering and is a scary place to be and forces us right back to basics.

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Naaman, perhaps for the first time in his life, was not in control. Astonishingly, he found himself taking advice from his wife’s foreign slave girl. A commander of the army willing to listen to someone as lowly as that, shows the level of desperation Naaman was feeling. When we are really hurting we are wise to open our minds beyond our usual prescribed limits, for the wisdom we need may come from very humble sources.

But Naaman nearly missed out on the healing that awaited him. You see, he had his expectations of

how this was going to pan out and things didn’t go according to plan.

Most of us, when faced with situations over which we have no control, want most of all to feel in control again. Naaman had money and power and he had friends in high places that could pull strings. He felt pretty confident as he set out on his journey. He had taken control of the healing process.

What he discovered was that the road to healing was neither quick nor glamorous. It was instead unpredictable and humbling. Left to his own devices Naaman would have missed out on being healed. It was only due to the wisdom of those around him that he stayed in the process and finally reaped the benefit.

The road to healing is, more often than not, a very long and arduous process. Mending relationships requires careful listening and a willingness to compromise, negotiate and build trust. None of these processes are glamorous; none of them are quick; all require humility.

Naaman battled with the latter requirement. He was used to being treated with respect; his rank demanded it. He felt demeaned by the treatment of

Elisha who didn't even bother to come out of his house to meet him; didn't therefore have the chance to be impressed by the overwhelming generosity Naaman was bestowing on him. And as if that wasn't bad enough, he was then commanded, via a servant, to wash in a pathetic river. He, who was renowned for acts of incredible daring and bravery, told to wash!

He was affronted! He had expected to experience the power of God in some spectacular way that left no doubt in his mind about the genuineness of the prophet;

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a compelling story he could share back home. Instead he didn't even meet the guy. What a let-down! His disappointment turned to fury and he stormed away.

Naamans expectations nearly got in the way of his healing - expectations of how he should be treated; expectations of how God should act; expectations of how he could witness to this God when he got back home.

If it wasn't for some very plucky servants he would have gone home still with leprosy and with a huge chip on his shoulder.

Expectations can be dangerous. They can confine and restrict our imaginations so that we fail to be open to the unexpected. When applied to God, expectations are particularly dangerous because God sees what we really need, not what we want. The healing we seek may not be the healing we need and if we insist on our expectations being met, then we may miss the deeper healing that leads to wholeness, rather than cure. We may miss the God moment altogether. Naaman discovered that sometimes God requires us to do something ourselves toward our own healing and it's not always palatable.

Expectations surround the Gospel story too, but they are very different. Here we have ten lepers approach Jesus as he enters a village. They however kept at a distance for the law had placed a taboo on them so that they suffered not just from a dreadful skin condition, but from being classified as ritually unclean, a blight on humankind, a person who was now a non-person. They were condemned for as

long as he suffered from the disease – punished for something over which he had no control.

They came with hopes but with no expectations. Those hopes were not only realized but surpassed as Jesus, moved with pity, tells them to go see the priests to receive their healing. They only asked for mercy, they received a lot more.

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By sending them to the priests he was fulfilling the expectations of the religious law so that they could be fully restored to their community, the final part of his healing. Perversely however we are told that only one came back to thank Jesus. “It is rare that some deed of compassion does not cause some pain to the doer and the giver.”

The cost of that compassion may be speaking up for those who have no voice and perhaps becoming unpopular. Or it may be speaking out against a wrong when most of those around would prefer to bury their heads. It may be confronting our own prejudices in the light of the Gospel and doing the uncomfortable work of walking in another’s shoes.

Two very different stories and yet they both hold important truths that span the centuries.

Naaman teaches us that it is important who we listen to, if we want to find God.

He teaches us that the truth that will lead to our healing, may come from sources we would usually ignore. He teaches us that the journey to healing can be long and arduous, devoid of glamour and sometime require actions from us that are unpalatable

Jesus teaches us that compassion is costly. He teaches us the role of good religion in our loves but also it’s shadow side when it is used to oppress rather than bring acceptance. Jesus teaches us that giving thanks is a principle part of the Christian life. Jesus teaches us not to be afraid of others opinions but to only care about being in line with the commandment to love one another as God, through Christ, loves us.

May we find God’s grace and be sustained by it, no matter what life throws at us, good or bad. ‘If you are given lemons, you better make lemonade.’