

Getting On with It

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Sources: Mark 1.40-45

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, 'If you choose, you can make me clean.' Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I do choose. Be made clean!' Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, 'See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.' But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

2nd Kings 5.1-14

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favour with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, 'If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.' So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, 'Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel.'

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, 'When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy.' When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, 'Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.'

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, 'Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.' So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, 'Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.' But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, '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. But his servants approached and said to him, 'Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, "Wash, and be clean"?' So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

Black History month can be a bit of an awkward time for many of us. For the most part, it is a wonderful learning moment and celebration. Both on TV and in all the bookstores and theatres, and dance and music venues, there is special emphasis on performers and performances from Africa, the Caribbean, and from right here. In documentaries and talk shows, we learn things we didn't know before, and are reminded of things we had forgotten. Here at church, it is simply splendid, especially in dreary February, to have an occasion to sing such a variety of different songs and responses, to hear the drums and children's rhythm instruments, and to sing the Lord's prayer together in a new voice. Great to emphasize the leadership of members of the congregation who are black, and to recall the ways the life of this community has been enriched over the years by members and visitors whose own experience and heritage deepens our collective experience and heritage. Last week, Nadia gave us resources and insights to help us move forward by looking backward, and sang us toward the future we imagine.

Even so. No matter what your personal background, it is hard not to be a bit ambivalent. One asks, is this perhaps somewhat forced or phoney? Could it be patronizing, not just here at church, but more generally? Do we imply, when we raise awareness of black history, that race is only a two-dimensional issue – is it just about black and white, when we know full well that it is so much more complicated. When we blithely sing the songs of another place and people, are we appropriating a voice? Misappropriating a voice?

I think we recognize that our celebration also raises the question of lament – and how much there is to lament as well as to celebrate. So much suffering, so much lost opportunity, lost time, wasted goodness and talent – a lot of very bad stuff to be seen when we do look back. Or look around. The history of colonial domination, of enslavement and slaveholding, of racial discrimination in matters of employment, education, housing, healthcare, law enforcement. All that is simply there, indisputable, a source of shame in a society that even 100 years ago claimed to be progressive.

Further, we know that racialization, and race-based unfairness do not arise simply because individuals have misshapen ideas. Bias operates systemically, and often in ways that are almost invisible. A significant literature on white privilege has grown up in recent years. This is a body of studies and reflection on the way the invisible norms of society operate to the favour of some and the detriment of others. Here are just a few of the aspects named – you can just situate yourself with these statements. ⁱ

I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.

I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see mostly people of my race.

I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.

I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.

I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to the "person in charge", I will be facing a person of my race.

If a police officer pulls me over, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.

I can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.

I can be late to a meeting without having the lateness reflect on my race.

Well, that one may not be relevant at Bloor Street. But just to give a sense of the scope, that's number 39, on a list of 50.

It is important for those of us who are white to be conscious of the way systems and unacknowledged norms and laziness conspire to perpetuate the racism that has marred our shared history. And important for everyone to be alert to the insidious ways that it sneaks up on people. Even though it may be true that things are much better now than they were before, and even if people's 'intentions are good', it seems that racism is a recalcitrant condition, in some ways beyond the reach of simple insight or self-help.

Racism has something in common with the leprosy that we read about in both lessons this morning. It is vile and disfiguring, though it seems not to stop you from being important, as in Naaman's story. This is not a perfect analogy, but racism, like leprosy, is a source of shame. It is something one should want to get rid of, but it is very difficult actually to do so.

See how this plays out in Naaman's story. He is a successful general, clearly doing just fine. But he has this nagging problem – the kind of thing he would like to minimize, but he just doesn't know how to get free. Simple measures don't seem to work, so he goes outside his comfort zone to seek a cure. He listens to a young servant girl, the antithesis of an authoritative source, and sets off to another country to be rid of the contamination. Of course it is a bit of a crazy story, with a letter from one king to another, and Naaman himself all loaded up with a huge fortune in gold and silver, and all those changes of clothing. He is really making a big deal of this. [but translate for a moment – do we ever do something extravagant and showy vis a vis racism?]

When Naaman gets to the prophet – the prophet is not impressed. Doesn't even come out to talk to him. Just says Go wash in the Jordan. Seven times. Nothing about, 'oh, fabulous of you to come'. No 'what a privilege to cure you'. Naaman is actually a bit insulted. Almost doesn't even follow the advice. Again, it is the servants who get through to him. And here is the point: just get on with it, they say. It isn't complicated, but you have to do it, you have to do it again and again. Like any of us

with the persistent vestiges of systemic and personal racism, it takes simple measures, repeated again and again.

Here is a different metaphor, from a member of the lectionary group, about a university class discussion of racism. The professor likened personal racism/ "othering" to having a third arm. She suggested that discovering the existence of this "third arm" is an uncomfortable process, but that the essential practice is to continually recognize its presence. She encouraged the class members to not be afraid of entering into the conversation (dispelling some feelings of guilt). The more we learn about our "third arm", the professor said, the less destructive we will be with it.

Simple attentiveness, perseverance, willingness to be corrected. There is a kind of humility that eventually emerges in Naaman, and that humility will serve us well too.

One other thing that we see both here and in the story that Cora read about Jesus healing a man from leprosy: to be healed of an enduring, disfiguring, shameful ailment is actually a miracle. It is the grace of God that underlies the healing. Go show yourself to the priest, says Jesus. Keep checking. Keep washing. Be relentless in your desire to be healed. And give thanks to God that health is possible.

Let us pray:

God of grace, God of healing, God of forgiveness,

You know our history, you know our present. You have seen the pernicious work of racial injustice.

We ask for your healing, in our world, and in our selves. We ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.amptoons.com/blog/files/mcintosh.html> This essay is excerpted from Working Paper 189. "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming To See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies" (1988), by Peggy McIntosh; Peggy McIntosh is associate director of the Wellesley Collage Center for Research on Women.