

FACES OF FAITH “The Anguished Patient”

Homily delivered by Blaine Paxton Hall at the Chapel on Maryville College campus, Maryville, TN, on March 7, 2012

Recently the *New York Times* featured an article about the growing number of hospitals which provide luxurious, concierge suites for those patients who can afford them.

As a healthcare provider in an inner city hospital, this article caught my eye. Over the years, I have cared for a few such “well-situated” patients, such as an admiral who was the CNO (chief of naval operations) of the US Navy, a pro football player, and even a head of state, flown in on his private jet, from the Middle East, with his entourage of staffers.

On any given day, at Duke Hospital, there are many patients who have flown in, or have driven in, from all over the country to receive organ transplants, or stem cell infusion, or other highly technical treatments.

Some patients have more emergent needs; and they are most urgent to gain access to healthcare at Duke; and they are flown in by a helicopter. At Duke Hospital, the helicopter landing pad is literally on top of the 9-story hospital building.

However, most of my patients are on the other end of the socio-economic scale; they have no money, no job, no insurance, no home, no family and no advocate.

Watching the helicopter land on top of the hospital—that image of a patient coming directly into the hospital, “through the roof” and by-passing the ER, and in-patient registration, and all that—that image always reminds me of the story in Mark’s Gospel of the paralyzed man who was carried to Jesus, on his mat by four others.

They couldn’t break through the crowds of people who thronged around Jesus. And so they went up to the roof of the building he was in, and dug through it, the Gospel says. And they let the paralyzed man on his mat, down through the roof, to land right in front of Jesus.

All of these people were “Faces of Faith,” it seems to me.

And Jesus recognized that, because the Gospel says, “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic: Son, your sins are forgiven.” Later in that parable he said to the paralyzed man: “I say to you, stand up, pick up your mat, and go home.” And that’s exactly what the previously paralyzed man did, much to the amazement of all those who were standing by.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, there is the story of the healing of Naaman. Naaman was an army commander. The book of 2nd Kings says: He was a “mighty warrior, a great man, and in high favor with his King,” because the Lord had just given his country a military victory.

But Naaman had a problem. He had leprosy. You see, leprosy was no respecter of person's socio-economic standing.

The story goes that one of Naaman's army's captives was a young girl who became the servant of Naaman's wife's. The servant girl told her mistress about a prophet in Samaria (this was not Jesus by the way, but a pre-figure of Jesus)...the girl said to her mistress: "this prophet can cure Naaman of his leprosy." She was a face of faith.

And so Naaman, eager to be healed, went to his King asking permission to go to the prophet for healing. And his King, the King of Aram granted his request saying, "Go then, and I will send a letter to the King of Israel."

And the letter sent from the King of Aram to the King of Israel said: "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy."

Now, Naaman would certainly have approved of the hospitals' concierge suite that I mentioned earlier in the *New York Times* article. As a matter of fact, this is what he expected. Only the very best will do, for important people, it seems.

But when Naaman arrived to the King of Israel, the King was not exactly compassionate. He was insulted, and angry; and he tore his clothes, saying: "What do you think? That I am

God or something that your King would send you to me to cure you of your leprosy?” He was even suspicious of an ulterior motive on the part of Naaman’s King. He thought that he was “trying to pick a quarrel with me,” the scriptures say.

On top of that, Naaman was greeted by a messenger, and not by Elisha the prophet himself, who was supposed to heal him. Well, Naaman was outraged and just as insulted as those wealthy patients in the *NY Times* article would have been, who expect only to see the attending physician, only the highest ranking healthcare provider, and no residents or medical students.

Naaman said, “I thought that for me Elisha 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 my leprosy!

Because you see, only the best will do for very important people like Naaman, the might warrior and highly ranked army commander.

Elisha’s messenger told Naaman to go dip in the river Jordan seven times. Naaman argued—asking why he couldn’t just go and wash in the rivers of his own country, which were, he said, “better than all the rivers of Israel.”

Fortunately, Naaman’s servant persuaded him to do as Elisha’s messenger had told him to do. So Naaman went and

dipped in the river Jordan seven times, exactly as he was instructed; and he was healed. The scriptures say, “his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.” In Biblical times and culture, leprosy was more than just an illness. It had the taint of shame; it had the implication of a moral judgment to it. Persons with leprosy were believed to have sinned in some way, and the leprosy was seen as a punishment. A person with leprosy was a leper—he had no other identity than that of his disease. A leper was feared and scorned. A leper was considered unclean, and was to be avoided at all costs, and was banished from his society.

Leviticus 13:45 says: “The person with leprosy shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ... (I am) unclean, unclean. He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease...He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp...”

Well, that’s all pretty clear...such a person was an “untouchable” and was banished from society. What a dreadfully lonely existence.

Analogously, in our times, we have the person with HIV-AIDS, who has been abandoned by his family; he has been shunned by society, and in some cases, I’m sorry to say, has been treated appallingly by so-called healthcare providers.

There is another story in Mark’s gospel of a person suffering with leprosy, which is in direct contrast to the story of

Naaman. In Mark's gospel, the person is simply "the leper." He has no name, no identity except that of his disease. That is because, that's all his society wanted to know about him. You have leprosy, that's all we need to know about you. Analogously, in our time, it's: "you have HIV-AIDS, that's all we need to know to form our opinion about you."

Unlike Naaman, the patient in Mark's gospel has no name, no pedigree, and no resume. Unlike Naaman, he did not demand to be healed, he just hoped to be healed, and he had faith that Jesus would heal him.

The Gospel says that he came to Jesus and knelt before him, and begged him saying, "If you choose, you can make me clean." This is a face of faith. And I too, have seen this face of faith on some patients, in the hospital, in the work that I do.

Jesus was not angry and insulted, like was the King of Aram when Naaman presented to him for healing of his leprosy. The story goes on to say that Jesus was moved with pity.

Furthermore, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the anguished patient and healed him saying, "I do choose. Be made clean." The Gospel says, "Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.

Jesus did the unthinkable by touching the leprous person—because to do so made Jesus ritually unclean, not to mention the fear of contracting the disease, and the fear of the associated sin and shame being imputed to him.

Jesus was moved with pity. Most everyone else was moved with revulsion at the sight of a leprous person. Jesus healed the man immediately—he didn't heal by proxy, and by long distance, such as Elisha in the story of Naaman.

In both stories, the leprous person, the anguished patient, was healed because of his faith. And it occurs to me that Jesus also was a face of faith—in addition to his compassion, he had faith that he could heal the very marginalized person who was knelt before him, pleading.

“A leper came to him begging; and kneeling, said to him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.”

The man suffering from leprosy was a face of face.

Jesus was moved with pity. He stretched out his hand and touched him saying, “I do choose. Be made clean.” And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean”.

Jesus was also a face of faith.

Mark 1:40-42

2 Kings 5: 1-14

Mark 2: 1-12

Leviticus 13:45-46

“Chefs, Butlers, Marble Baths: Hospitals Vie for the Affluent.”
New York Times, by Nina Bernstein, January 21, 2012

