

I've been thinking a lot about short cuts this week. We heard Alex Rodriguez join the list of athletes who chose performance enhancing drugs as a short cut to athletic performance. And are those athletes any different than Bernie Madoff and his ponzi scheme or the bank executives whose shoddy financial practices led to economic trouble for all of us? Or our national policies of continually cutting taxes as we run up deficits? And we consumers have taken short cuts too. Rather than saving our money to make our purchases, we have gone for immediate gratification and run up our credit card debt. We have become a nation of short cut takers.

And we see short cuts in our Old Testament text as well. The Syrian commander Naaman wanted a short cut. He had leprosy.

Naaman's wife's servant girl, who happens to be from Israel, tells them that there is a prophet in Israel who can cure him. The King of Aram, or what is today Syria, sends Naaman to Samaria with all support—a letter, money and gifts for the King of Israel—After presenting his awesome display of wealth and power, Naaman shows up at Elisha's house with his horses and chariots, and is hoping that Elisha will walk outside, wave his magic wand and make him all better. There is a sense of entitlement about it all, isn't there? As if bringing enough gold and silver to scare the pants off the king of Israel weren't enough, Naaman brings horses and chariots, an impressive display of military might, to the home of a prophet. It is as if Naaman thinks, “once he realizes how important I am, he'll heal me quickly.”

But Elisha does not just walk out, say “shazaam” and heal Naaman. He tells him to go bathe seven times in the Jordan River to be made clean.

And Naaman gets angry. He takes his chariots and horses and pouts off, “I thought that for me he surely would 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.”

I don't know about you, but I hear that and think, “boo hoo Whiny Baby McWhinerson.” And Elisha, as far as we know, has gone back to lying on his sofa, watching Seinfeld re-runs on TV. Which is probably just as well. Had Elisha seen that little display, would he have taken back his words?

In any case, it appears that Naaman's best gift is having servants who will tell him the truth. Because his plucky servants give him a new perspective on his shortcuts and say to him, “um sir . . .if the prophet had told you to do something really difficult, wouldn't you have done it? All you have to do is bathe in the Jordan.”

Immediately, Naaman recognizes the truth in their words and he goes and does the work needed to be made clean.

Because the reality is that the work that is necessary to be made clean isn't always that difficult. There will be things we have to do. It will take our time. It might require us to swallow our pride. Naaman, you'll recall, in the midst of his whining, declares that the rivers of Syria are far better than the Jordan. Why would he bathe in that dinky river when he could bathe in a far more powerful river? But being made clean isn't about being impressive. It is about following directions.

What do we need to do to be made clean?

I said earlier that we are a nation of short cutters. And in many situations, I think that is true. But this week, I saw a lot of people who were not looking for short cuts. I don't know how many of you went to any of the Special Olympics Winter Games. But I went down to Qwest

Arena to cheer on the figure skaters Thursday. It was great. These men and women from all around the world have been working and training for years for this moment. And they were overcoming difficulties that most of us can't even imagine. They took no short cuts to get here. They did not use performance enhancing drugs.

They didn't have endorsements. They will not become celebrities or host Saturday Night Live.

And the volunteers. I know that some people from this congregation volunteered their time to make these Olympics happen. The sheer number of volunteer hours it took to bring this off is staggering.

I don't know how many of you have heard the stories of the blue and white scarves. The coordinators made plans in 2007 to make scarves for all 2,000 Special Olympians. That would have been great and would have been a big undertaking. But when they put out the plea to knitters and crocheters to create the scarves, they received over 60,000 of them. People from all over the country and all around the world contributed scarves so that there would be plenty to go around. Nursing home knitting groups, girl scout troops, women who knit as they went through chemo treatments for cancer. Each of these scarves tells a story of people who didn't take short cuts. All of this to show hospitality to the Olympians.

And if you were to talk with people who volunteered at the Special Olympics, I suspect you would discover that all of them received more than they gave. The sacrifice of time and effort was more than offset by the hugs and smiles they received from the Olympians. I'm sure the volunteers didn't need cleansing from leprosy, but like Naaman, perhaps they were made clean, their souls were restored because of the work they performed.

So, in addition to the question about what is it that we need to do to be made clean, I'll add another.

What do we do in response to being made clean?

Naaman goes back to Elisha's house and rings the doorbell. Elisha gets up off the couch and comes to his front porch. Naaman says, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel."

Naaman responds to his healing with praise. And his praise is a form of thanksgiving. Because when you are made clean, you realize that your future is much more hopeful than you had previously believed. When you are made clean, you appreciate your blessings.

Our Gospel story this morning is also a leprosy healing story. But our leper here is nameless and presumably does not have the social or political power that Naaman had. He comes to Jesus and begs him, saying, "If you choose, you can make me clean."

Jesus reaches out his hand and touches him, saying, "I do choose. Be made clean."

Immediately, he was healed. No bathing in the Jordan for this leper. And this leper doesn't stop and say "thanks", exactly, but he went out and began to proclaim it freely. His praise is evangelism. This might be the best model of evangelism I can think of in the New Testament, actually. This nameless man does everything he can do to make sure that everyone else hears the Good News of Jesus Christ. Not to save people from hell or to be able to tell his friends how many souls he's saved, but out of gratitude for what has been given to him.

I'm not sure that we today can understand the stigma that came with leprosy in those days.

Ancient societies, including 1st century Palestine, operated from the assumption that uncleanness was contagious. In other words, if you touched a person who was unclean, you would also be unclean. So, lepers were among the people who were kept separate from society. And while there may have been a medical component to this uncleanness, the people of the day considered it to be a religious problem. Leprosy was considered a punishment for sin. And if the disease went away, there were rituals at the Temple that were required of the person before they could be made clean again and reenter society. Jesus even tells the healed man to go to the priest.

So, when Jesus reached out and touched the leper, he should have been contaminated by the man's uncleanness. He should have been made unclean.

But that's not what happened. When the Son of God touches someone, he makes them clean. The cleanness of Jesus is stronger than any of our uncleanness.

When Jesus reached out, touched, and healed an unclean man, the leper may or may not have consciously grasped the huge change in how the world was ordered. But on some level, he knew it was good news and he went out to proclaim it freely.

As we continue to go through Mark's gospel, be on the lookout for other places where Jesus' touch makes people clean. And let us be on the lookout for the times in our own lives when Jesus' touch makes us clean, so we too, may go out to proclaim it freely. Amen.