

Lutheran Counseling Network

Faith and Everyday Life, 2021

January

I fell in love with the story of Naaman the first time I heard it. It didn't appear among the Bible stories I hear as a child, which made it clearly stand out when I heard it as an adult. In 2 Kings 5, there is an experience of healing that starts with a girl from Israel who was taken captive and was Naaman's wife's servant. The girl shared about a prophet in Samaria that can heal leprosy. Naaman, a commander of the army of the Aram King, had such a skin disease. To fast forward, Naaman ended up seeing Elisha, the prophet, who gave him the instruction to bathe in the river Jordan seven times and be healed. Naaman was frustrated by this instruction and he went away angry. A servant who was with Naaman suggested to him that if Elisha had asked him to do something difficult instead, he would have done it to be healed. The servant talked Naaman into trying the simple thing, in spite of his reservations, and wash in the Jordan. Naaman came out of the river after his seventh dip and his skin was restored to the skin of a young boy.

I wonder how often it is in our life that the ones that can and do speak healing and restoration come from unlikely places. It is the two servants in the story who Naaman ultimately believed. A young servant girl spoke about her God who heals. Another servant speaks of letting go of the anger and trying Elisha's instructions. Who do we listen to? Where do we get our instruction? What healing has happened in your life?

Written by a staff member of Lutheran Counseling Network

February

Have you ever struggled with highly resisting doing what makes most sense for you to do because you either don't want to or believe that you can't do it? I know a lot about that. When I was about to head off to college, I had made one vocational decision, I would not become a pastor. Math was easy for me in school, so I would become an engineer or a math teacher. Eight years later, I was ordained as a Lutheran Pastor and eleven years after that I started what I believe was my real calling to be a Pastoral Counselor.

God's spirit who lives in me and in all of us kept leading me in other directions. This is very much like the struggle that Moses was having with God, when God met him in the Burning Bush. Moses had become well educated and trained in the best Egyptian schools and was the very best person to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt.

BUT, Moses was very resistant to God and came up with a reason that he simply was not capable of taking on such a huge assignment. He had an impediment in his speech that was so bad that he feared the people would not be able to understand him.

God reassured Moses at the very height of his anxiety by telling him that He would be with him and help him with his speech, tell him what to say and the ability to be understood. To me, the promise of God to Moses and the promise of Jesus to be with us always are the greatest reassurances that we can have. The fear of abandonment and the shame of our incompetence can be so strong. Knowing that we are not alone, that we are loved and that we are capable of what God has put before us can help us to go forward each day. We can be confident that we are moving in the direction that God is leading and helping us.

Written by a staff member of Lutheran Counseling Network

March

PSALM 23 (NKJV), “The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness, for his name’s sake.”

Who is this Shepherd? At the outset, He is the One who does not leave his sheep in lack. This wonderful Shepherd Lord knows intimately the sheep over which he has charge and what their needs are. In the vernacular of the counseling profession, I liken this to parental “attunement”, that special attentiveness of a mother to her child, who comes to not only anticipate her baby’s needs, but to know from her baby’s cries and behavior if the baby is hungry, tired, upset or content. And what parent doesn’t know the satisfaction that comes from soothing and providing rest for an upset child?

The same is true of our Shepherd God who desires peace and rest for each one of us. It may have been a long time for some of us to consider this Shepherd as concerned for our needs. Or perhaps life’s road has been rugged, and we learned long ago to shelve our needs, or have little expectation of them being met. Having needs is being vulnerable, and being vulnerable can be risky.

Consider this Shepherd Lord who cares that we be able to lie down, to rest, who gives restoration to our very *soul*. God gives leading and guidance, and provides righteousness.

Meditate on this Psalm; soak in this revelation of our Provider God in verse after verse. Open your heart and mind to hear God’s heart speaking to *you*.

Written by a staff member of Lutheran Counseling Network

April

Audrey was a challenge. She came into Sunday school like a tiny tsunami – rushing around the room, disrupting lessons, hiding behind a barrier and distracting the other children. I responded as best I could, attempting to redirect her, enticing her into sitting with the others, setting boundaries with firmness and kindness. Nothing was working.

One day I watched Casey as she peeked under the barrier at Audrey, asking her to come out. “You can sit with me,” Casey gently invited. As the rest of us watched with amazement, Audrey crawled out from under the barrier. She sat right next to Casey. And later, in our prayer circle, she sat in the bigger girl’s lap.

Casey seemed to understand what Audrey needed; an invitation, an offer to stay close, a way into the community. Little by little, with Casey’s help, Audrey joined our class and began to participate. Later Audrey wrote this prayer: “To God, I open my whole self. To brethe (stet), to pray, to be holey (stet). Listen to God and be safe. You have the croge (stet) to do it. Amen.” Casey had opened a way for Audrey to come into our community and into relationship with God. And in her prayer, Audrey seemed to be opening the way for others. This is Jesus’ way of invitation.

Written by a staff member of Lutheran Counseling Network

May

Romans 8:26 (NRSV), "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

In my estimation, it is impossible to journey through this life without experiencing at some point an absence of words or spiritual energy to cope with our pain. Those moments - or even seasons - of loss, despair, numbness can leave us feeling isolated from the Divine and from one another, feeling increasingly immobile and hopeless. Although the discomfort can become excruciating, these times are actually an invitation to lean into the Spirit as well as for God to reach out and into us. It is not about the "right" prayer. It is not about the "right" behavior. It is not about getting God to listen. For the Spirit is already present in our grief, anger, loneliness - even our disbelief.

"Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness..." As a young adult, I found myself in a difficult situation. I suddenly felt far from God's attention, affection and ultimately God's grace. "...For we do not know how to pray as we ought..." Many tears were shed, many journal pages filled with self-loathing and hopelessness. One afternoon after an exhausting shift at work, I laid down for a nap. And I dreamt. *God and I were alone in the middle of the vast universe. I shielded my face, stomach in knots, seeking a way out of God's presence. But God simply stood before me... and wept. No words were exchanged. God wept with me, not because of disappointment but because my pain was also God's pain. God joined with my tears, leaving my despair without any purpose.*

Be encouraged in your weakness. You are profoundly known and profoundly loved. Although your story is different than mine, God's Spirit will pursue you to the ends of the earth, regardless of feelings and circumstances. Those will come and go. But the Spirit is ever present and "intercedes with sighs too deep for words" on your behalf.

Written by a staff member of Lutheran Counseling Network

June

In the Old Testament book of Ruth, we are told of the relationship and connection of Naomi and her son's wives. To set the stage, Naomi was a widow and had two sons. 10 years after her husband's death, her two sons had also died. Both of her sons had married Moabite women. After the deaths of Naomi's sons, the three widows headed toward the land of Judah. They had heard that the Lord had provided for the people in Judah. As widows, provision had to be a weighty concern. The three widows went on their way to the land of Judah, together. I wonder how, in some or many ways, this interaction paralleled their journeys of grief. A mother who was now childless, two women who were without husbands, one who returns to her family in Moab and one who embraces her mother-in-law as her daughter; all were trying to find a new way to live. Along the way, Naomi asked or insisted that her daughter-in-law's to return to Moab to their families. One turned back toward home and one stayed with Naomi.

The story of these three women is one of connection and courage. Grief is to be shared and knowing *what* you need and *who* you need is a part of healing. Orpah kissed Naomi goodbye and headed back to Moab. Ruth needed Naomi and God, who they followed. Ruth's response is raw, tender, and beautiful. You can find it in Ruth 1:16-17. It speaks of life and love, I suggest you read it.

Written by a staff member of Lutheran Counseling Network

July

In Philippians 4:7 we read, “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (NRSV). I memorized this verse years ago, long before I really knew the multitude of things that can surpass understanding. One of the beautiful parts of growing in age is the growing sense that I do not need to have answers. Often it is the questions that get me farther in relationships and my faith than the conclusions or understandings I have reached.

Peace expressed in this world has a variety of iterations. The versions of peace as harmony, or as a “peace out” or goodbye, a truce, or peace and quiet are based on our human understanding. What speaks to the peace of God in my life is ironically the silent inner voice. Jesus guarding and tending to my heart and mind in such a way that is beyond what I could ever dream of or accomplish on my own. It is in this place, when my human understanding is secondary to allowing God’s presence of peace, that I can meet some of my greatest joys, struggles, and pain. It is in this place where God’s people can rest and feel protected in Christ Jesus.

Written by a staff member of Lutheran Counseling Network

August

In the story of the Prodigal Son...a younger son takes what he has learned his entire life and decides to go in another direction. He asks for his inheritance while his father was still living. He has a good time, a really good time. He spends his entire inheritance which would have sustained him for a lifetime in a short time. His new friends are now gone. He finds work in a pig pen. He is hungry and homeless. He makes his plan to go home and ask for forgiveness. He wants to work for his father as a servant. He plans his speech on the journey home.

The Father has been waiting, each day going to the highest point of his estate looking longingly for his son. When he sees him he lifts his robes and runs to greet him. As his son begins his long rehearsed speech his father cuts him off. He says his son was lost is now found. He puts an elegant robe on him, and tells his servants to prepare a feast for his son. He was restored as a son.

How many times do we think our past is unforgiveable? How many times do we stay away from those we have hurt because we think what we have done is unforgiveable? How many people are awaiting their prodigal? Returning, humbly seeking restoration, can bring both eternal rewards from a Loving God and also to a family awaiting their family to return home.

This is a story of hope: hope for reconciliation, a prodigal returning home, a family looking and waiting for that return. Joy and forgiveness is awaiting them; child, parent, friend together again.

Written by a staff member of Lutheran Counseling Network

September

Eugene Peterson's *The Message* presents the Great Commandment this way: "Love the Lord your God with all your *passion* and prayer and intelligence." I need passion? Sounds great, but for me, as an introvert, a Lutheran, and a person of Northern European extraction, it sounds a little outside my comfort zone. Passion is for the extroverts, the Evangelicals, those whose ancestors come from warmer climates.

But wait a minute. There are times when I do show passion; over an issue that's important to me; over a value I want my boys to learn, over the accomplishment of a friend or client. Maybe passion isn't a way of behaving; maybe it's more an attitude of the heart. When I think of it this way, I realize I do have passion for God; when I put God first, when I devote my time to church projects I care about, when I celebrate with my clients. These are all ways my passion for God shows through. Of course, there is always room for me to grow in my passion for God. I can approach prayer and devotion with more zest. I can think about inviting a neighbor to a church event. I can even talk about my faith to a friend or family member. This is where my passion for God can invite me out of my comfort zone.

Thanks be to God for the welcoming us all into relationship just as we are. And for inviting us to grow – in passion, in prayer, and in intelligence.

Written by a staff member of Lutheran Counseling Network

October

My mother was my Sunday school superintendent when I was growing up. I grew up believing my mom had a lifetime of faith that she passed on to me and my siblings. It wasn't until after her death that my father told me that it was his influence that led my mom to faith and being baptized after they were married. I had no idea. The rich seeds of faith that my father had been given as a child were handed to my mother who handed that love of Jesus to us. My mother grew in faith along with her children.

In The Message translation, we read this paraphrase of 2 Timothy 1:5-7 "That precious memory triggers another: your honest faith—and what a rich faith it is, handed down from your grandmother Lois to your mother Eunice, and now to you! And the special gift of ministry you received when I laid hands on you and prayed—keep that ablaze! God doesn't want us to be shy with his gifts, but bold and loving and sensible." These passages have a rich message of passing on the faith. It is a call to be generous with encouragement and prayer for those who are in our family, in the family we have chosen, and for those we mentor. I believe this to be a message to us today and every day. Be bold with the gifts God has given us. Be loving with the gifts God has given us. Be sensible with the gifts God has given us. Go...keep that ablaze.

Written by a staff member of Lutheran Counseling Network

November

In Luke 17:17 (NRSV) we read, “Then Jesus asked, ‘Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?’” That is a reasonable question indeed. There were ten lepers who called out to Jesus, all asking for mercy. Jesus noticed them and told them, presumably all ten lepers, to go and show themselves to the priests. As they went, they all were made clean. One returned to thank Jesus. This scripture tells me the story in a way that has me wondering if I would return with the one and give thanks to Jesus. I can hope that I would.

Truthfully, I can easily imagine myself being with that group of nine who didn’t return. I am compelled to know their story. Did the lepers disperse to different priests, what were they wondering along the way, was their healing instant or was it gradual? Being made clean, what does that mean?

Is this my story? Would I go quickly to rejoice with my family? Would I sit by the side of the road in disbelief? Would I stay and chat with the priest and thank them and praise God for this miracle? Would I start planning my future without the stigma of being an outcast and untouchable? Would I meet up with the other healed lepers? Would I spread the word of this miracle to everyone I meet?

I trust in Jesus, who showed love and healing to the lepers. I am thankful for Jesus, who shows me love and healing every day. I am with the one and with the nine. And you?

Written by a staff member of Lutheran Counseling Network

December

"Somewhere in the din of it all
Beneath the rubble of our discontent
There lies in the heart of the world
In the soul of each of us—
A tender village

How shall we remember?" Author unknown

I think about the village that lies in the soul of each of us as I read 1 John 4: 7-12. I am heartened. John reminds us: "God lives in us and his love is perfected in us." I'm also enlivened by the idea of lying still as the village sometimes must.

For so many of us this season, we struggle to love as God would have us love and to operate out of the village within that can act as manger for our God. This is the central message of Advent, isn't it? We prepare ourselves to greet God and to remember that He came into the world to baptize it. God confirms for us the grace of creation - so good, He chose to live in it with us.

And let's face it; it takes a village to love as we think God would have us love. Love often looks strong and challenging; sometimes, tender and soft. It calls upon all parts of the created good -- all parts of the village within -- to see, know, name and serve our sisters and brothers. When we struggle in this season, it is good to take heart in the promise of Bethlehem. Lying still, awaiting God.

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