

February 15, 2009

2 Kings 5:1-14

Keep the Faith & Keep Fit

Keeping the Faith Is Key to Keeping Fit.

The good news is that reported cases of leprosy in the United States are way down. The bad news is that our nation's health has become compromised by a host of other diseases.

Here is some data from the National Center for Health Statistics: "The rate of violent crime in the United States is worse than that of any other industrialized country.

Our population has increased by 41 percent in 40 years, but violent crimes have increased more than 500 percent, and total crimes more than 300 percent. Eight out of every 10 Americans will be victims of violent crime at least once in their lives.

The U.S. homicide rate for 15-24-year-olds is seven times higher than Canada's and 40 times higher than Japan's. The United States is near the top in rates of abortion, divorce and unwed births.

And in elementary and secondary education, we are at or near the bottom in achievement scores. Since 1960 we have witnessed a more than 400 percent increase in illegitimate births, a more than 200 percent increase in the teenage suicide rate, and a drop of 75 points in average SAT/ACT scores.

About Thirty-five million dollars was spent last year on metal detectors in American public schools" (Professor John Rodden of the University of Texas in "Dimensions of Forgiveness," *Vital Speeches*, LXIII [September 15, 1997], 712).

The HIV infections of the last 25 years have sensitized people to the social and communal aspects of disease. But we are still slow to recognize how the effects of ill health are weakening our entire nation.

Look at the daily news.

We are a nation in need of healing. One detail of today's story about Naaman the leper that continues to be as true today as it was in the eighth century B.C. is the high cost of quality health care.

Naaman brought a tremendous amount of gold and silver with him on his search for a cure. How many of us have watched our own or a loved one's assets evaporate as costly lifesaving, life-enhancing treatments kept mounting?

Not only are we experiencing severe threats to our personal health, but our primary sources of health care are also in crisis. This double jeopardy has spurred the growth of a whole new economy of nontraditional health-care alternatives and additives.

Proper diet and regular exercise are two big health factors we can control and which cost us very little. But many other factors are also now being mixed into our health-care regimes

- Vitamins, herbal extracts, meditation practices, stress management techniques -- all combined with our other health maintenance regimes -- checkups, vaccinations, antibiotics -- keep us as happy and healthy as possible.

So why does nothing seem to work? Why don't we feel good? Why aren't we feeling better if we're getting better? One reason we don't know how to feel good is that so little work has been done to discover the sources that actually do make us feel good and positive about life.

David G. Myers and Ed Diener pointed out this dearth of research in a study they called "The Science of Happiness" (*The Futurist*, 31 [September-October, 1997], 1-7).

They found that in the past 40 years, the publication *Psychological Abstracts* mentions articles that address anger 5,119 times; anxiety is mentioned 38,459 times, depression 48,366 times.

But happiness?

Only 1,710 mentions. Life satisfaction? Only 2,357 mentions. Joy? Only 402 mentions. This amounts to a 21 to 1 ratio of negative to positive emotions studied by our scientists.

Carl Jung successor and Jungian analyst James Hillman asks the question, "Why do we focus so intensely on our problems?" and then answers it: "Somehow we desire our problems; we are in love with them as much as we want to get rid of them."

By now researchers have asked a huge sampling of the human race -- more than a million people -- what makes life satisfying. The results are in. And we now have some predictors of joy and life satisfaction.

Surprisingly or not so surprisingly given today's lesson of Naaman's story, there is virtually no relationship between income and happiness.

The richest Americans (*Forbes'* 100 wealthiest Americans) are not happier than the average American. Similarly, there is little relationship between disabilities and happiness. Remember within four months of his paralyzing accident, Christopher Reeve reported "genuine joy in being alive."

Medical researchers did find five traits that characterize "happy" people. They give these characteristics in contemporary terms, so I'm translating a bit here:

- 1) "Positive self-image." People who are content with life are confident about their abilities, and embracing of their gifts.
- 2) "Personal Control." Upbeat people exert control over their lives. In theological language, people who are happier are more self-disciplined than people who aren't.
- 3) "Optimistic." A positive outlook on life and openness to others is essential to good mental health.

page 4

4) "Extroverted." In their use of this term, people who are more concerned about the ability to achieve lasting relationships with others than about some personality style.

But the trait that correlated most closely with happiness was

#5: "Faith."

Karl Marx got it as wrong when he said religion was an opiate of the people. On the contrary, religion is a key stimulant to and ingredient in a happy life.

"Actively religious people are much less likely to become delinquent, to abuse themselves and others, to divorce and to commit suicide. In Europe and North America, religiously active people also report greater happiness.

In one Gallup Poll, highly spiritual people were twice as likely as those lowest in spiritual commitment to declare happiness. Other surveys find that happiness and life satisfaction rise with strength of religious affiliation and frequency of worship attendance.

One statistical digest of research among the elderly found that one of the best predictors of life satisfactions is religious worship and lifestyle”.

While psychological examinations of emotional health ("happiness," "life satisfaction") may be considered by some as “soft science,” researchers in the "hard sciences" are rapidly finding similar correlation's between a commitment of faithfulness and the physical well-being of individuals.

Recent studies have found that those individuals who profess a belief in God, who confess to an active faith relationship, are more generally healthy than those who don't.

In fact, it is no longer a hypothesis that when believers do become injured or ill, they tend to heal faster, respond better to treatment, and generally get well more quickly and more often than those who disavow any active faith life.

There seems to be a definitive physiological relationship between health and faith. MRI scans reveal that those regions of the brain most active and responsive during healing processes are the same as those that are functioning at highest capacity when individuals are praying or involved in worship services.

Scientists theorize that the brains of those who are actively faithful are physiologically "wired" for healing -- that portion of the brain that flexes in faith practices also helps us back to health.

This new collegial relationship between medical science and faith in the quest for health is evident by the number of medical schools that now devote part of their student-doctors' training to issues of faith.

Students are encouraged to take "faith histories" as well as "medical histories" when interviewing patients. These instruments help in finding out what role faith plays in a patient's life and how it may be integrated into any course of treatment that might be prescribed.

The hardest disease to cure is the one that remains undiagnosed.

Unable to pinpoint what exactly ails us, we stumble around, grasping at any and all suggestions that come our way. When struggling to find a cure, we tend to seek out the flashiest, most expensive, most demanding course of treatment -- convinced that if the road is tough we must be on the right track.

Naaman suffered from one of many skin diseases labeled as "leprosy." But he could find no cure in Aram.

In desperation Naaman journeys to Israel to visit a prophet he has been told could heal him.

But when Naaman receives the prophet's prescription, he is outraged by the seeming simplicity of the treatment. Instead of performing some elaborate healing ritual, complete with pomp and hocus-pocus, Elisha merely instructs Naaman to go and bathe in the Jordan River.

The prophet does not even appear before Naaman to accurately diagnose his malady. He simply sends a servant out to Naaman with his directions.

Naaman thought a return to complete health depended on his obtaining a cure for his leprous skin condition. Elisha's diagnosis and proposed treatment, however, reveal that Naaman needs more than clear skin in order to be restored to full health.

What he needed most was his attitude adjusted. The prideful sense of self-importance that Naaman demonstrated outside Elisha's door had to be washed away just as completely as the white lesions that covered his skin.

Elisha's prescription is for humility, for unadorned faith in the healing abilities of God. The biblical witness and wisdom is way ahead of its time: The nervous, endocrine and immune systems are all inter connected. What Elisha did was initiate "cross talk" among the three.

Naaman almost blew it. He was ready to do anything in order to receive healing, anything, that is, except admit that he could do nothing but have faith that he would be healed.

Only when Naaman finally lets someone else take charge, only when he humbly submits himself to the plan, the muddy waters of the Jordan River, does Naaman finally experience the healing he longed for.

Naaman's journey toward health teaches us that to be healed and whole, to experience "life satisfaction" or "serenity," we must remain open to all the possibilities a life of faith might present to us.

Naaman kept an open heart throughout most of today's lesson. He began by being open to the suggestion of a Hebrew slave girl. He was open to seeking help from the enemy, Israel. He was open to meeting with the Israelite king.

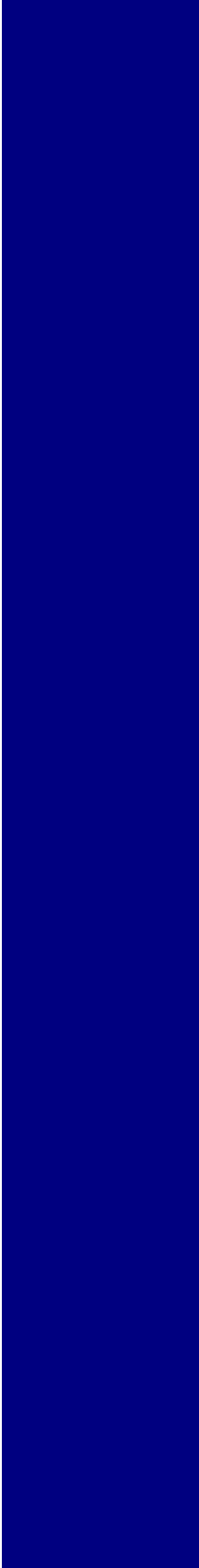
He was open to meeting with the prophet Elisha. Although his pride resisted to the last moment, Naaman ultimately revealed himself to be open to the wise words and counsel of his servants.

In response to their urging, he is at last open to the simplicity of the act required to give him healing (bathing in the River Jordan). This final act opens Naaman fully to the grace of God, of Israel's ONE God, enabling him to be healed.

Are you "wired" for healing in your own life? Are your heart and spirit open to whatever path your faith journey might take you in order to receive genuine, complete health? Are you prepared to receive both a diagnosis and a course of treatment that may be totally unexpected?

Ray Kybartas, has written a book on fitness. Madonna wrote an introduction for it. Sean Penn wrote a blurb for it. Many in Hollywood clamored to support it. Its title is *Fitness Is Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

Wrong!



Page 8

The biblical witness does not make fitness into a religion.

Fitness is NOT religion. Religion is fitness.

Today's biblical witness is that keeping the faith keeps us fit.

We live in a culture that says Keeping Fit is Keeping the Faith.

The gospel tells that Keeping the Faith is Key to Keeping Fit.

Amen!

