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II Kings 5:15a, Mark 1:40-45
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"Compelled To Speak"

In his book, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Faith*, Professor Tom Long reminds us of the time, thirty years ago, when the famous Soviet dissident and novelist, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, came to the United States. His defection from his native land was seen as a kind of moral triumph of Western democracy and capitalism over Soviet totalitarianism and communism. Some Russians warned the U.S. that Solzhenitsyn might bring us a few surprises.

In 1978, Solzhenitsyn was invited to give the commencement address at Harvard University. In that speech, he stunned the crowd with his denouncement of the West's "moral lassitude and spiritual poverty." He gave a speech that reflected his deeply-held religious and spiritual views. Solzhenitsyn said:

"...we have lost the concept of a... [Supreme Being] which used to restrain our passions and our irresponsibility. We have placed too much hope in political and social reforms, only to find out that we were being deprived of our most precious possession: our spiritual life. In the East, it is destroyed by the dealings and machinations of the ruling party. In the West, commercial interests tend to suffocate it. This is the real crisis." (pp.13-14) His testimony to his faith even received boos from the shocked and unprepared crowd. Yet, Solzhenitsyn felt compelled to witness to the God who had transformed his life.

When God heals us and changes us, something way down deep inside of us compels us to tell what God has done. The journey to become a witness can be fraught with risks and dangers. In the book of II Kings, we hear the remarkable story of the proud and powerful Syrian general, Naaman who has been brought low by the dreaded disease of leprosy. He is the commander of all the king's forces; but he cannot command a cure for his leprosy. The proud general learns from a lowly captive Israelite serving girl that the prophet Elisha, in the land of Israel, can cure him. The mighty warrior must seek a cure in the land of his enemy. The powerful general loads up his horses and chariots with gold, silver and fine garments. When he arrives at the palace of the king of Israel, the king thinks it is a trick. He is terrified because he cannot cure leprosy; he is afraid of what Naaman may do.

The prophet Elisha sends for the general. Stirring up a great cloud of dust, Naaman comes with his horses, chariots, gold, silver and fine garments to the door of Elisha's house. Instead of going out to meet the general with the ceremony due to someone in his position, Elisha sends a servant with a simple message, "Wash seven times in the Jordan and you will be clean." Naaman is insulted. He is furious. His pride is wounded. He expects high drama and a bit of hocus pocus. How foolish he now looks, having come all this way only to be told to bathe in a muddy river. It is too easy: no powerful magic, no great expense, no wizard, no boiling cauldron of noxious liquid, no bitter potion to drink. Can the mighty general risk looking foolish in front of his soldiers and his servants?

In the first chapter of Mark's gospel, a leper approaches Jesus to plead for healing. To us, it doesn't sound like much of a risk for a desperate person to ask for help. Yet, lepers lived on the edges of society. They were unclean outcasts, forced to stay clear of others. In calling out to Jesus, this leper takes the risk of being humiliated and chased off or being spit up, beaten and stoned. Afraid of what the crowds will do and afraid of one more disappointment in a hard life, the leper could have kept quiet.

Sometimes I wonder if we really expect anything new from God. Like Naaman, we are afraid to let our guard down and look foolish. We want things to happen on our own terms and in our timetable. Like the leper, we are not sure we can handle any more disappointments or scorn. We dress up to come to church; we put on our best faces and hide our pain.

Isn't it a kind of bitter irony that here, in the fellowship of God's people, where God invites us to be most open, we are often most closed? What if we were to come into God's presence with our guard down, expectant, hopeful, trusting and open? Naaman does. He lays aside his anger and his pride. He goes and washes in the river Jordan. The leper does. He says to Jesus, "If you will, you can make me clean."

The path to transformation is fraught with risks and dangers. Not only for you and me, who stand in need of God's healing and saving grace, but also for God. In the story of Naaman, God heals an enemy of Israel whose armies are involved in a perpetual tug-of-war with the armies of Israel. What kind of new theology is it going to take to explain that God is aiding and abetting the enemy? In healing the leper, Jesus takes a risk. Jesus is going among the cities and towns of Galilee proclaiming the kingdom of God. When leper speaks to Jesus, Mark tells us that Jesus is moved with pity for the leper. Some of the oldest and best manuscripts read that Jesus is angry or indignant. Is he angry or full of compassion? We have a hard time thinking of Jesus as angry. Could he be both annoyed and full of compassion? He is in the middle of things. If he reaches out and touches this leper, then he, too, becomes unclean. It is a problem that he may not be ready to encounter. At the very beginning of his ministry, he puts everything at risk. He reaches out, touches the leper and says, "I do choose. Be made clean." He makes a choice. He puts his ministry at risk. Perhaps this is why he sternly warns the healed man to keep quiet. The time is not yet here in Mark's gospel for the full power and identity of Jesus to be revealed.

The path to transformation is fraught with dangers. Barbara Kingsolver's novel, *Bean Trees*, tells the story of Taylor Greer, who leaves rural Kentucky in an old VW bug and heads west. In Oklahoma, she stops at a bar, where a woman thrusts into Taylor's arms a tiny girl who has been terribly abused. The silent little girl, named Turtle, clings to Taylor with a vise-like grip. When Taylor and Turtle make it to Tucson, Taylor begins a new life working at the "Jesus is Lord Used Tires" store. In the yard around the store, twisted, bare and seemingly lifeless wisteria vines grow out of the dirt. When Taylor sees those vines, they remind her of Turtle's life.

The longer Turtle is with Taylor and her friends, the more the little girl seems to come to life. Taylor's persistent and risky love and Turtle's willingness to take the risk of receiving

that love seem to heal Turtle. Turtle gradually comes out of her shell. One day, Taylor notices how the old, dead wisteria vines are coming to life with fresh leaves, flowers, seed pods. Only Turtle calls them bean trees. Taylor thinks to herself, "You just couldn't imagine where all this life was coming from. It reminded me of that Bible story where somebody or other struck a rock and the water poured out. Only this was better, flowers out of bare dirt." (p. 114). Taylor adopts Turtle and tells the little girl that the adoption certificate "means you're my kid ... and I'm your mother, and nobody can say it isn't so ... we're going home." (p. 232).

When God transforms our lives, we belong to God and nobody can say it isn't so. In spite of Jesus' command for the former leper to keep silent, he can't keep his mouth shut. He is so full of joy and gratitude that he tells everyone what Jesus has done for him. Soon, Jesus cannot go about openly because of all the crowds in that region. When God gives Naaman something that all of his gold and silver cannot buy, Naaman cannot keep silent. He doesn't care who hears him when he declares, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel." Naaman left Syria as a proud general with treasures fit for a king. He returns home a humble man, with his bags packed with the dirt from Israel so that he can build an altar in his native land to this God.

When God transforms our lives, we are compelled to speak. We may stumble and stutter to find the words we need and want to say. Even in our fumbled words, we become witnesses to the truth. Tom Long says that "Christians believe we cannot tell the truth, not the whole truth, without talking about God and, if we cannot tell the whole truth, we cannot be fully alive as human beings." (*Testimony*, p. 5) We talk about God because we take God seriously; we know the presence of God and we are compelled to witness to what God has done in our lives. We do not need to be poets, writers or professional theologians to be witnesses. All we need to do is share with others how we have come to know God and how God is changing us. No one else can tell the story you have to tell. No one else can witness to the way God has been your companion in illness, your hope in grief and your strength in the struggles in your family. No one can tell the truth, the whole truth, about your life but you.

In the end, it is the simple truths that matter most. A man I know has been through a terrible time in his business. He said he brought some of the problems upon himself because of his own foolishness and extravagance. He said that there have been many days when he wanted to give up and run away. He knew that meant running away from his family, his community and everything he had ever valued. He had become someone he hardly recognized anymore. He knew in his heart that he was not living the way God wanted him to live; he was not the person God created him to be. Bit by bit, he said that God gave him the strength to find his own true self. He had to let go of some things, some signs of success, that he found didn't matter as much as he thought they did. In finding himself, he has been able to re-establish his life and work on his relationship with his wife and children and his friends. As he told his experience, I could see that God had given him new joy in his life. He was the only one who could witness to the simple truth of what God had done in his life.

There is a story that you have to tell. There is a story that only you can tell. When God heals us, forgives us or changes us, something way down deep inside of us compels us to speak of the marvelous things that God has done.