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God's Prophets – Elijah & Elisha
VIII. The Humbling and Healing of Naaman
II Kings 5:1-19

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Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master and in high favor, because by him the Lord had given victory to Syria. He was a mighty man of valor, but he was a leper.

Naaman was a man who had everything – power, status, esteem, success, riches. He was beloved by his king, beloved by his soldiers, beloved by the people of Syria, feared by the people of all the surrounding nations, including Israel. But . . . there was just one problem – Naaman was also a leper. A secret sickness which he no doubt took great pains to keep covered up from others. A secret weakness which all his power and bravery and martial might could not even begin to subdue. A secret shame eating away at his inner soul, even as he outwardly basked in adulation. But, says the Bible, he was a leper.

I think we are being invited straight off into reading Naaman's leprosy as a metaphor for all that is diseased and sinful and wrong and hopeless and shameful in any human life, in every human life – in our own lives. That thing which we most seek to keep hidden from others, that thing which secretly eats away at our sense of self and sense of well-being. That thing which we try to keep hidden even from ourselves – lest that miserable thing, whatever it is, that miserable truth about ourselves overwhelm us. But . . . Naaman was a leper. In every life there is a "but". Naaman's was leprosy. What is ours? In every life there is a "but", undermining that image of the winning and winsome self we try so hard to maintain before others – that thing which we would never post on Facebook. That thing which undermines our sense of worth as a human being.

In every life there is a "but" – what is ours? Because what Naaman's story also invites us to consider is that it is that place of weakness, that place of sin or shame, that place of affliction, that place of hopelessness which could very well prove to be exactly the place where the God of grace can most easily find His way in – the very place where the grace of God can most readily reach us in order to redeem us.

For so it is for Naaman. A young girl, an Israelite slave no doubt captured during one of Naaman's victories over Israel, speaks to her mistress, Naaman's wife, of a prophet in Israel who could easily cure the great general's leprosy. Naaman is so desperate for a cure that he is willing to try even this – to go ask this favor of a nation he both despises and has defeated. His own king, the King of Syria, writes a letter to the King of Israel, asking that the king see to Naaman's cure.

In the meantime, Naaman loads up a mule train with seven hundred and fifty pounds of gold and one hundred and fifty pounds of silver to cover the cost of his treatment. He also takes with him a small army of Syrian soldiers. The King of Israel sees this great entourage coming into the capital city, reads the letter from the King of Syria, and falls into pieces. It is telling that the King of Israel not only seems not to know that there is such a prophet in Israel, but seems not even to know the power of the God of Israel to heal. So, he panics – he assumes this can only be a ploy to open up a new war between the countries, once he has failed to deliver the requested healing. And Syria has defeated Israel in the last two wars.

But the prophet Elisha hears of Naaman’s arrival, hears of the letter and its request, hears of the panic of the King of Israel – and so sends word to the palace: *“Let him come now to me, that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel.”* So Naaman, with all his mules laden with gold and silver, all his chariots and mighty men, shows up at Elisha’s house. Just image that great entourage of worldly might and splendor just parked out in the front yard. But the prophet is neither intimidated nor impressed. In fact, he does not even come out of the house to bow before the great general and to perform the healing. Instead, he sends a messenger out to the king with these instructions: *“Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean.”*

Naaman is furious. He has never been treated this way in all his days. Does not this pathetic little prophet in this pathetic little second-rate country not understand just who Naaman is and how important he is – not to mention how feared? Elisha has not even come out to greet him – an insult to Naaman’s status and honor. And as for that washing in the Jordan River – an insult to Naaman’s intelligence, some kind of pathetic joke. Because Naaman knows the Jordan River – it’s a muddy little stream barely worthy of the name “river”. If you want to talk about rivers, then come to Syria where real rivers flow. In a rage, Naaman turns away from Elisha’s house, planning to cancel the whole expedition and maybe even lay waste to a few Israelite villages on the way home, just to pay back the insult he has received.

But bravely, humbly, no doubt on their knees and fearfully, some of his servants beg permission to speak to the mighty, and mighty angry, great general. *“Sir,”* they say to him, *“if the prophet had told you to do some great and really difficult thing, you would have been willing to do it, wouldn’t you? So why not give this very simple thing he has told you to do a try – especially since we are already here and since the prophet did say it would make you well?”* And with that Naaman faces a choice. Stand on his wounded pride, his status, stand on that mighty public persona he has so clearly crafted and maintained – or to swallow his wounded pride, humble himself, to acknowledge the greatness of his need for healing, to own up to his own helplessness before the “but” of his leprosy. And so to shrug off the perceived insult he has received and go do this ridiculous, humiliating thing the prophet has told him to do. Naaman chooses his need over his pride, the path of humility over the assertion of station. He humbles himself, and heads to the Jordan River.

And so must we – if we, like Naaman, would be healed, would be cleansed, would be saved. Naaman, as so often with us, wants salvation only on his own terms. It will be a fair transaction between him and the God of this prophet – his gold and silver as a contractual exchange in return for his healing. In other words, Naaman wants to be healed – but only according to his

own conditions, in accordance with his own wishes, and in relation to his own great worldly status. And do we not often seek precisely this in the way we approach God, approach our own hope of cleansing and healing and salvation?

We want to be saved – but we want to be the one who sets the terms of the deal. We want God to help us in regard to that secret “but” which belies our public presentation – but we only want Him fixing that, not messing around with anything else. We want to have our healing, but still remain in control over our lives once the healing is done. We want grace – but we don’t necessarily want the God who gives that grace. *“Lord, if you will give me grace, then I will agree to give you one Sunday a month, two percent of my income, and my name on the church’s role. But don’t expect anything more from me. Don’t expect me to take seriously any of that other ‘Christian-y’ stuff.”*

But salvation is never, ever on our terms – only and ever upon God’s. Which means that salvation for us, as with Naaman, can only lie down the path of humility, of letting go of our ego and all its demands – and simply allowing God to have His way in us, whatever that may entail. Salvation is not found in any other way than in falling to our knees before Him and confessing in humility before Him our great need for His help, no matter what that might entail. Salvation is found only when we are willing to say to God, *“Not my will but yours alone. I place myself in your hands entirely. I give myself to you completely. Heal me and then use me as You direct.”*

We may be generals and captains and kings to the world around us, within the lives and lies we have fashioned around ourselves – but only the truth will do before God. And the truth, as Martin Luther once put it, is that before the throne of God, we are all nothing but helpless beggars. Salvation begins in dying to the self which has been. Salvation lies in acknowledging before God that we cannot save ourselves, that we cannot fix that wrong, that sin, that shame, that emptiness, that loneliness, that longing which lies within. For only in our humility can He then raise us up into a new life. Only when we lay bare before Him our bruised hearts and wounded spirits and battered bodies can and will His grace truly find its way deep within us – in order to cleanse us, in order to heal us, in order to save us and make us whole. Humility before God is the only place where our healing from God can begin.

Anne Lamott, one of my favorite Christian writers, tells the story of how she came to be healed and saved in her book, Traveling Mercies. Much like Naaman, she had grown up in a family with many of the signs of power and prestige and respectability that this world honors and lifts up as success. She had learned from the cradle that we are to be self-sufficient, got-it-all-together people who have within us all that we need to make it through this life with success and happiness. She writes, *“I was raised by my parents to believe that you had a moral obligation to serve the world.”* But that also, the reverse of that credo, that *“God forbid that someone should ever think I needed help. I was a Lamott – Lamott’s give help.”*

But, in time, she discovered, as most of us eventually do, that she did need help – and lots of it. Beginning in her teenage years, she sunk into a dependency on drugs and alcohol. The drugs and the alcohol became both the cause of and symptom of a life falling ever more rapidly apart as she entered adulthood. In desperation, and though she had been raised in a family with no use for

God, she found herself being drawn to a small Presbyterian church in the neighborhood where she lived – as well as drawn to faith, drawn to God. A prospect she admits she found “appalling”:

I thought about my life and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends, I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I . . . said out loud, “I would rather die.”

. . . One week later, when I went back to church, I was so hungover that I couldn’t stand up for the songs, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I just thought was so ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials, but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to the feeling – and it washed over me.¹

“*And it washed over me.*” The grace of God, the healing power of His love, the assurance that in Him we are no longer lost, but found – no longer worthless in our leprosy of body, soul, or spirit; but now just simply beloved and cherished in His eyes. “*And it washed over me,*” the grace of God over that great “but” of her life which was destroying her – just as the muddy waters of the Jordan River washed over the great general Naaman seven times and washed away his leprosy, washed away his shame, washed away his secret, his sin, and his sorrow. Making him clean, making him whole. Making him new – with skin like a new-born child. With a heart, also, born again, born anew, born from above by the grace and power and love of the God of Israel. Naaman is no less than born again and baptized in those muddy waters – and in him a new life has now begun.

He goes back to Elisha’s house, he and his great entourage. That great “but” of his outward flesh and inward spirit no longer an issue, a man humbled and healed by God. Naaman goes back and stands before Elisha – and this time Elisha comes out gladly to meet him. Picture Naaman standing there, gold-braided general’s hat in hand, still dripping water from his baptism in the River Jordan, and he opens his mouth and begins to make his profession of his newfound faith. “*Behold,*” he says to Elisha, “*Behold, I now know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel.*”

And with that, and with the prophet’s blessing of peace, Naaman turns to begin the journey home to Syria, two mules now loaded with dirt from Israel as a reminder, as a sacramental declaration, of his commitment to seek to serve from now on a different Master than either the King of Syria or his own glory. That, from now on, his life – his born-again life – would be in service first and foremost to the God who had humbled and healed him. Naaman is both humbled and healed, as we all must be if we are to have life and have it abundantly – humbled and healed. And Naaman heads home abounding in gratitude, abounding in hopefulness, abounding in the grace of the one true and eternal God.

And brothers and sisters in Christ, so may we. Whatever that “but” may be in our hearts, in our bodies, in our spirits, in our lives – there is something greater, there is Someone greater who already knows exactly what that “but” is and yet loves us unconditionally, even so. And as we turn to Him in our need, so we also shall be humbled and healed – washed clean, made whole, made new.

¹ This and the above, quoted in William H. Willimon, “Healed by the Wrong People,” Pulpit Resource, Vol. 32, No. 3 (July, August, September 2004), p. 7.