

November 4, 2018
Naaman Was a Foreigner
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II Kings 5:19b-27

II Kings 5:9-16 [The Healing of Naaman]

⁹ So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. ¹⁰ Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." ¹¹ But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! ¹² Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. ¹³ But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" ¹⁴ So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

¹⁵ Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant." ¹⁶ But he said, "As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!" He urged him to accept, but he refused.

II Kings 5:19b-27 [Gehazi's Greed]

But when Naaman had gone from him a short distance, ²⁰ Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, thought, "My master has let that Aramean Naaman off too lightly by not accepting from him what he offered. As the Lord lives, I will run after him and get something out of him." ²¹ So Gehazi went after Naaman. When Naaman saw someone running after him, he jumped down from the chariot to meet him and said, "Is everything all right?"

²² He replied, "Yes, but my master has sent me to say, 'Two members of a company of prophets have just come to me from the hill country of Ephraim; please give them a talent of silver and two changes of clothing.'" ²³ Naaman said, "Please accept two talents." He urged him, and tied up two talents of silver in two bags, with two changes of clothing, and gave them to two of his servants, who carried them in front of Gehazi. ²⁴ When he came to the citadel, he took the bags from them, and stored them inside; he dismissed the men, and they left.

²⁵ He went in and stood before his master; and Elisha said to him, "Where have you been, Gehazi?" He answered, "Your servant has not gone anywhere at all."

26 But he said to him, "Did I not go with you in spirit when someone left his chariot to meet you? Is this a time to accept money and to accept clothing, olive orchards and vineyards, sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves? 27 Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you, and to your descendants forever." So he left his presence leprous, as white as snow.

Naaman was a foreigner – and Syrian at that. Syrian, mind you. He was general of the army of Syria, called Aram in the story. Naaman's Aramean army had recently crushed Israel and carried young girls away as slaves, one of whom lived in Naaman's own house. Today we call such men – what? Syrian militants who attack other countries and enslave their citizens? *Terrorists*, right? We call them *terrorists*.

Not the Bible, though. The Bible's adjective for Naaman the foreigner is "*highly favored of the Lord*." The Bible says it was the Lord who gave him the victory in battle, battle against Israel whose children were captured and enslaved. Friends, I cannot say the Bible has an answer for every question of our lives. But one thing I know for sure: there are more lessons here than we can learn in one lifetime.

Would you pray with me? *How you, O God, manage to teach redemption out of violence and war is a mystery to us. And yet, our own hearts are neither free nor clean. We covet. We wish harm upon our enemies. We need much faith if we are to let ourselves know the truth of our own fear and weakness. Let us read and hear your word with faith, we pray. Amen.*

How rarely I open my commentary on 2nd Kings became clear from a note I found there, dated July 14th, 1998. "*Annette, congrats on being officially voted in. That made me very happy. I'm leaving for a 5-day vacation so I won't be there Wednesday or Sunday. Rob D. already knows I won't be there Sunday. Also, here are the ushers for Sunday: Andy C., Michael U., Alisa T. Andy and Michael will find a 4th person, perhaps Mitchell, and Andy has the notes I made about what needs to happen. I think they'll do a great job. See you next week. Greg.*"

The church knows something of the healing of Naaman – more from Luke, chapter 4, than from 2nd Kings, chapter 5. Jesus' mention of it made his hometown congregation so angry they tried to throw him off a cliff – on the same day they praised his parents for what a good son they'd raised. They tried to kill him, simply for pointing out that God chose to heal a Syrian leper rather than a Jewish one.

How afraid does a people have to be, to get so worked up over the *idea* of God being kind to foreigners? There's the story-you-know; today is the story-we-don't-know, the story of Gehazi. Gehazi isn't a foreigner. He's Jewish – and religious. A prophet in training. An assistant pastor, we might call him in church. *In the service of Elisha*, 2nd Kings says, as Samuel had been to Eli once upon a time.

Naaman is headed home from Israel now, healed both of leprosy and his arrogance. He professes faith in the God of Israel, and he promises henceforth to worship Yahweh only.

Furthermore, as a symbol of his gratitude, Naaman offers Elisha a fortune: ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. Two to three million dollars to us. Every penny of which Elisha refused, as was – and is – entirely proper. The healing of God is not for sale. The grace of God is not for sale.

Instead, Naaman asks for two things. He asks for some dirt – two mule loads are enough, apparently – to take home and spread around so he can worship Yahweh on the ground where he'd first met Yahweh. Secondly, he asks for some pliancy around the interpretation of the first commandment. *“Yes, I'm only really going to worship the God of Elisha,”* he says, *“but I still have to work for Aram, which means I'm going to have to pretend to worship those other gods. So, just know, really, I don't mean it.”*

Naaman is gone from Elisha just long enough for Gehazi to drum up his angle on the offering Naaman mentioned. Gehazi catches up to him with an adjusted explanation. Turns out there's need for a small gift, after all – just one talent of silver and two sets of clothes. \$15,000 and the clothes. Some other prophets just arrived and need to be outfitted. Can Naaman help?

Classic, I am telling ya. I've been in ministry a long time. It's a classic, minister, sideways way of pretending their malfeasance is for the benefit of others. Naaman couldn't be happier. He gives Gehazi double what he asked for, plus servants to carry it back – 150 pounds of silver, plus the clothes. Gehazi has his hidey hole picked out, and he's back at work before Elisha could miss him.

Of course Elisha missed him. Elisha is a prophet. We know Elisha always knows what's going on around him. Furthermore, Elisha is Gehazi's teacher, his mentor, his spiritual director. Elisha gives Gehazi the chance to turn this mess around. Gehazi declines. Then, Elisha sounds just like Bill C.'s grandma, when he and his brother were acting up: *“I seen what you done and I know what you're up to.”* Elisha goes on: *the leprosy that once afflicted Naaman would now cling to Gehazi and his descendants.*

The question that clings to me as the story closes is: did Naaman also know? Did Naaman also know that Gehazi was lying? Did Gehazi really fool him or did Naaman give away the treasure knowing full well he was being swindled? It's always the question, isn't it, when we're asked to help? Whether or not we help depends upon who's asking – and if we believe they're being true. Because, unlike Naaman – who felt privileged to be able to give – our own sense of privilege too often has us feeling like stakeholders, complicit in the outcome of the investment we're being asked to make.

What if Naaman knew? What if he knew and gave Gehazi twice what he asked for anyway? Does that make him crazy or faithful? And is that question “either/or”? Everyone knows, *don't be like Gehazi*. *“Don't be like Gehazi”* is a perfectly good sermon. It's also a really good theme for a mid-career pastors' conference.

But what about *“be like Naaman”*? The Bible says he was God's highly favored. We first hear of him from Jesus, but it's almost as if Naaman's heard of Jesus too: the things Jesus

says about giving everything you have to follow him; stories of Zacchaeus, and Jesus's friend Mary and her perfume. "*Be like Naaman*," who was healed not only of his gross skin disease but his arrogance – the arrogance with which he insulted Elisha in the beginning, that turned to gratitude that had him on his knees ready to give Elisha all he had at the end, because of what God had done for him at his baptism in the Jordan river.

"*Be like Naaman*," who couldn't wait to give away his fortune to anyone who asked, apparently, regardless of their motive or their reason – as if he didn't even want it, as if it didn't much matter if he was rich or poor, or what other people did or didn't do. As if what mattered is what God had done for him.

Of the dozen sermons in this story, one runs below them all: God does as God chooses. And if we can get quiet enough to listen, the same true things stay true. Hear two of those true things:

ONE: God loves whom God loves, whether we like it or not. And however articulately we state or how deeply we believe in this world's most sacred standards of who is right or wrong or good or bad or who belongs or doesn't, we'll never pre-determine God's preference. And if the Bible is any indicator at all, God's preference leans to the poor, the outcast, the foreigner.

TWO: Knowing God changes people's values. Before he knew the Lord, Naaman cared deeply about his own reputation. How he was greeted mattered to him. Afterward, he bowed in gratitude to the same man. Jesus said, *Give to anyone who asks*. Naaman did. Was he a fool? was he a victim? or was he, simply, a very grateful, faithful man with his priorities finally in order? And if he was, what does that mean to you, a person of faith today?

Has your experience of God left you more grateful than arrogant, more generous than suspicious, and more sure than ever that God chooses and God favors whomever God chooses and favors, for God's purposes in the world today? – just like God has always done.

Would you pray with me?