

Naaman's Leprosy Healed 2 Kings 5: 1-15

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How many of you remember this story from 2 Kings? Naaman was the general of the Aramean army, second to the King, perhaps. The text says he was a mighty warrior, a man of considerable power and probably victorious in all the battles he led. All but one! One victory that he longed for eluded him. Naaman, the powerful general was powerless against the disease that afflicted him – leprosy. The story, as we know, after quite a bit of drama, has a happy ending when Naaman is healed of his disease. Yesterday, my colleague and friend, Allen started the bible study with a question: how do we read? Now, at your tables, take 3-4 minutes to talk about how you read this story.

As Allen pointed out, how we read is very important. There are 36 tables in this room and I assume there were at least 36 different readings of the story. A good number of the interpretations of this passage sees it as an amazing story of deliverance or salvation, of how a man suffering from a dreadful disease, a man who did not belong to the covenant people, was cured by the God of Israel, especially since the people of Aram (present day Syrians) had their own deities, like Rimmon. Now, this reading of the text lines up with the context then. When was the book of Kings written? It was during the Babylonian exile 930-560 BCE and in those times, diseases were attributed to the sinful nature of the person as stated in Leviticus law and so redemption from this sinful nature was a big deal. Other exegetes see the story as an instructional tool or a lesson to understand that God often uses the personal failures, sicknesses, and problems as a means to glorify God. Sure, those are probable interpretations as are the ones you came up with at your tables. Allow me to share how I read the story.

First, who are the main characters of this story? If we looked carefully, there would not be a story of the healing of Naaman, if it wasn't for one person, the one who set in motion the healing that Naaman received. Sadly, this person does not even have a name, at least it is not recorded; she is faceless, invisible: **the servant girl!** Nothing much is told about the girl other than that she was taken captive from the land of Israel; and she waited on Naaman's wife. But, it is this invisible, nameless servant girl, somebody from the margins, who initiates the process of healing. The servant girl talks to Naaman's wife who again is not given much air time but she takes the risk and believes the servant girl and speaks to her husband. Then comes the healer, a prophet from the margins, Elisha from Samaria. If you remember, when Naaman goes to the king and informs of this remote possibility of a cure by a prophet, what does the king say? "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." Who said anything about the king? But you see, such is the order of things. Powerful people don't engage with small people, certainly not an insignificant prophet like Elisha. But as my mentor told me and I quote "When the powerful despair they will accept any help they can get, even from annoying and pesky prophets."¹ Now to the wonder drug that Elisha prescribes. "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times:" And how does Naaman respond – are you kidding me, wash in that dirty old creek? I will develop Giardiasis (beaver infection) or E.coli infection on top of leprosy! Don't we have cleaner and better waters in the rivers of Damascus? To add insult to injury, the prophet does not even

¹ Vitor Westhelle, Class lecture, Systematic Theology II, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Winter 2002.

say all this to Naaman's face but had the nerve to send a messenger. How dare he? Naaman is boiling with anger. But then again, his servants talk him into following the prophet's orders and behold Naaman is healed. The so-called marginal people, no name servants, yet again coming to the rescue.

So, an unnamed servant girl and not Madame Secretary, a prophet in the insignificant town of Samaria and not the court physician, the dirty muddy waters of Jordan and not the great rivers of Syria, the unnamed servants of Naaman – they become the agents of Naaman's healing, where his flesh is restored like the gentle soft skin of a child.

Now that we know who the characters are, let's move to the second point – the healing. After dipping himself in the Jordan, Naaman was healed of his leprosy, and we read that his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child... **like the flesh of a little child**. I remember the feel of my children's smooth and soft bodies when they were babies; so very sensitive to touch. The flesh of a little child is throbbing with life, soft and tender and very sensitive. But that is not the case of someone who has leprosy.

For a year after our daughter was born we lived on a mission compound where my father-in-law was the pastor and missionary. In the compound there was a hospital where a good number of the patients suffered from leprosy. I remember my father-in-law saying how their skin turned pale and how the sensitivity was progressively impaired. According to Merck medical manual, leprosy affects mainly the skin and peripheral nerves and causes numbness and weakness in areas controlled by the affected nerves. In other words, it results in a condition where one progressively loses the sense of touch, where one does not feel the touch of another, when one becomes insensitive!

So, what was the healing really about? Was it about the mystical power of river Jordan which brought about the miraculous cure or was it something else? It was a transformative healing! Naaman was incapable of feeling the touch of another being, his wife's, his children's. He had lost all sensitivity. **That** was what he was cured of! He was transformed! He regained his ability to feel, he got his sensitivity back, like the flesh of a little child! He was now sensitive to the touch of another! And, it all started with that unnamed, insignificant servant girl. But, this captive servant girl and her role is mentioned only in passing in commentaries and seen not as instrumental to the healing of Naaman when she is actually the healer. She may not be a prophet but her words are no less prophetic! She is a mover and a shaker! Without her and her speaking up, Naaman would never be healed. Imagine this: an unnamed servant girl, captured during war becomes the true evangelist! She proclaims the gospel, the good news of *soteria*, salvation, health to this mighty warrior. The captive freed the captor! The truth is, she is not the captive; it is Naaman who is the captive, captive to the disease of discrimination, of insensitivity and she, the servant girl, sets him free! She knew that she was liberated by grace to be neighbour to Naaman. As Allen mentioned yesterday, neighbour was not a noun but a verb for her! She is not the insignificant but the most significant in the story. Walter Bruegemann says this and I quote "if you want to be an evangelist, pay attention to her. She is not into loud, aggressive religion. She is not into church growth. She speaks only quietly, only once, anonymously." I agree with Bruegemann for the most part. It just bugs me why when a girl or woman speaks the adjective is quietly or softly or anonymously. Clearly, he does not know some of us here and certainly not my daughter! Jokes apart, can you imagine someone, anyone, listening to a captive servant girl if she spoke quietly during the Babylonian captivity. Quietly or

otherwise ***when she speaks, it is powerful and authentic! It is the thunderous truth of the love of God to all even to an insensitive commander; she proclaims the truth that set the leper free.*** Now, I ask: how did you read the story? How many of you saw the girl?

So, back to the question: what is the story about? Yes, there is a mighty warrior in the story but **even more powerful is the presence of the nameless servant girl.** Let us name her prathayasha (meaning hope in Malayalam) or nirbhaya (meaning brave). Thanks to the brave servant girl, the story is still told, not of the battles won by a warrior but of someone who was open to the presence of the insignificant, someone who let himself be touched by the unnamed. A privileged man, in spite his reluctance, paid attention, and saw the face of his sister in the face of the insignificant and the unnamed. Naaman's mightiness lay not in the battles he won! Naaman's power lay in his willingness to let go of that power, and be vulnerable, vulnerable to heed the voice of the insignificant. Fast forward 560 years and we see yet another man who listened and lived with the insignificant and outcastes of the society. Who is that? Jesus! Jesus' parable of the sheep and goats in Mathew 25 is an explication of seeing the face of God, of Christ, in the little ones, the insignificant ones. In another 1500 years, Luther comes along and says, "If you want to see Christ, stare not at the heavens; in every alley, at your door (and I add in the insignificant) you will find Christ." Naaman's story is a 560 BCE version of precisely that! In allowing himself to be vulnerable, to cross the barriers between the powerful and weak, the mighty and the lowly, he opened himself to God's saving grace, and received healing.

We, you and I, claim ourselves to be people of faith but if our faith does not move us to cross boundaries, be they of ethnicity, colour, creed, gender/sexual orientation, you name it . . . our faith is dead. The girl dared to cross boundaries and for her it indeed was a risk, a risk that could cost her dearly, her life. Imagine what would have happened if Naaman was not healed. But her faith enabled her to speak the truth at all costs. Her faith was a liberating faith. It helps her to cross over, to leave behind the constraints that framed her, and enslaved her. This is the faith that we are called to live out. If she can do it, shame on us if we don't, we, whose situations are far less complicated than hers and definitely not as risky as hers.

So, here is the question for us – What are we ailing from as individuals, as congregations, as a church? How open and willing are we to receiving the touch of those we deem insignificant? Why do we render the unfamiliar invisible? Why do we resist the touch of another? Why do we not see the other? Why do we not listen to the other? Why can't we be open to being guided and touched by the unnamed and the insignificant so that we are rendered sensitive, so that our eyes are open to see outside of the frame that we have locked ourselves into, so that our ears are opened to listen to the pleas and cries of another?

The thing is, those among and around us that we deem insignificant, those whom we render nameless and invisible, they are the means of grace, the bearers of hope; they practice hope. We are called to engage in a seeing and listening and walking that bring us face to face with those that have been rendered invisible and voiceless; we are called to do the unexpected, we cannot but be vulnerable, step out of our comfort zones, cross the boundaries that segregate us and embrace the other. Do we really believe we are liberated by God's grace, like the servant girl? Do you? [yes] Great...then live it! Yes, we heard great stories earlier today and we have come along, but you and I know that doesn't quite cut it!

The focus of this session – 6:30 to 9 – as Pat and Joanna introduced us to, is on racial justice. We are taking time to think about the discrimination in the church, our church, based on colour, about relationships based on colour and even worse, justice based on colour. The English poet and artist, John Ruskin said, “colour is the most sacred element of all visible things.” “As a spiritual force color can bring joy, lift spirits, and energize.” Sadly, that is not how we see colour, especially, people of colour. Some years ago I read a book titled “What colour is the scared?” In it the author says, colour is “sought yet feared simultaneously.” Yes, peoples/persons of colour are feared and thought of as dangerous, not to mention insignificant, and are subject to racial discrimination. We are all racists whether we admit it or not. Discriminating others based on colour is a grave injustice! And, when we do that we are not only being unjust but also insensitive!

Next time you watch a movie pay attention to the characters. Who is portrayed as the good guy and who is the villain. What do they look like?

We believe that we are created in the image of God, don't we? I do. So, I am called to ask myself: "How can I, a woman from India, made in the image of God, see the face of my sibling or parent when I look at the face of any human being? How can I see and acknowledge in any and every human being the image of God, this God whose human face is seen in the face of Jesus? And, I cannot stop at the questions. I have to figure out a way to do it!

So, may be, as a synod, we could start with these questions. Who do we see when we look at another? Who do we deem as insignificant, render invisible, around and amidst us? Why? Also, to whom are we giving power? Are we giving power to those that are actually performing the miracles and bring about healing (like the servant girl) or . . .? (I fill let you fill in the blanks) These questions are difficult. However, we are called to address it and try breaking down the barriers, whatever that may be, that divide us, at the very least create cracks in them. *Este momento!* This is the moment! Not tomorrow or next month. Can we, all of us, the privileged and the people of colour, the original peoples and the settlers, the heterosexual and the LGBTQIA2+ take a moment to acknowledge that all of us are created in the image of God? Can we see our sister or brother in the face of every human being so that our flesh, our being, like Naaman, is restored like the flesh of a little child, sensitive to the touch of the other? Amen.