

Sermons from Park Hill: August 24, 2008

Sermons from
Park Hill Congregational UCC
Denver, Colorado

Rev. Dr. David Bahr
pastor@parkhillchurch.org

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2nd Kings 5: 1-14
"It's Too Easy"

Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. The king thought he was great because through Naaman, the LORD had given victory to Aram. Naaman was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy.

A group from Aram took a young girl from Israel captive, and she served Naaman's wife.

She said to another woman, "If only Naaman would see the prophet in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

(Having overheard this conversation) Naaman went to the king and told him what the girl from Israel had said.

"By all means, go," the king of replied. "I'll send a letter to the king of Israel." So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of

silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing.

The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy."

As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? (and since they were enemies, he thought) See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!" (What's the trick? What is he really up to?)

When Elisha the prophet of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: "Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel."

So Naaman went with (all) his (many) horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house.

Elisha sent a messenger (to go to the door and) to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed."

But, (with those instructions), Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out (of his house) himself and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy.

The rivers of Damascus (in my country) are better than any of the waters of Israel. I could have washed in them and have been

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cleansed." So he turned and went off in a rage.

But, Naaman's servants went to him and said (carefully), "If the prophet had told you to do some great thing, something difficult, wouldn't you have done it? Why not, then, when he tells you simply, 'Wash and be cleansed!'"

So Naaman (this great warrior from Aram, probably a bit humbled) went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the prophet of (Israel's) God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

When we want to deal with the creator of the universe, the mother of humankind, the giver of all things great and small, the Big Kahuna, it should be difficult to get an appointment. It doesn't seem right that we could simply say, excuse me Ma'am. It's too simple. And since life is a complex mystery, solutions to our problems should involve some incomprehensible diagram for us to follow - like when I'm trying to build furniture to look like the beautiful picture on the box, but for the life me, when I'm in the middle, I have to take it apart because the simple instructions were too convoluted for my thinking. I've finished something like 20 years of school, but I can't follow the instructions to build a nightstand. Grace should be complicated too.

Apparently Naaman thought that, due to his exalted status as a successful army commander who had led his soldiers to win difficult strategic battles, he deserved a difficult regimen to follow in order to be healed of his leprosy. And he felt dissed that the prophet Elisha himself wouldn't come out of his house to put on a show, waving his hands and shouting to his God. But only a lowly personal assistant came out with a simple message. Problems with your skin? Go wash it.

Many Christian commentators appropriate this story and compare it to a baptism, but that's reading something into this great story that simply isn't there. This story should stand on its own, not be seen as some kind of Christian precursor, which is what often happens to Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus doesn't do it either. Jesus refers to Naaman the Syrian in his very first sermon in Nazareth, at the beginning of his ministry. But he didn't have baptism in mind. He brought it up to shame the religious leaders in the congregation that day. He said, "There were many lepers in that day, but the only one cleansed was an enemy."

Peter Hawkins, in the Christian Century, said that "Jesus plays the politics that are implicit in the story, making good use of the perennial tensions between Jew and gentile, us and them." Jesus told the people gathered that he came for all people, and when he raised Naaman's name, the people became enraged.

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There's great political intrigue throughout the story. I'm sure you noticed it. Naaman is the high-ranking commander of an enemy who brings down Israel's King Ahab. In the booty of war, he claims a young girl from Israel to be his wife – or more likely, to either add to his wives or be the servant girl of his wife. She suggests he consult a prophet back in the conquered Israel. So in a bizarre situation, the victor must now ask for help from the vanquished, who rightfully question why this hostile king would ask for a favor – and perhaps start a whole new war. Naaman comes with every horse and chariot he can, just as he would to a battle, and is upset by treatment that doesn't rise to his status. A lowly messenger is sent to speak to him. And insult to injury: wash in the dirty Jordan, not his own rivers. Rage. Servants with more power than himself. Servants telling their masters what to do. Enemy kings doing one another's bidding. Naaman's injured pride. Missives between kings... It's a great political story. And a simple story of grace.

Go wash up. That's all. A simple answer. You want healing, you need grace, you need forgiveness. Ask – listen – go and do. It's that simple. Say what you need. Act on your need.

Is it that simple? It's just a little humility and trust. Humility, trust, and asking for help, swallowing your pride. And everyone

of those things is difficult for self-sufficient people, "I can do it myself, thank you very much." Do you recognize the type? It can be so simple. And so hard. So difficult to accept as to refuse to do it, and walk away in self righteous anger. "I'm not a child."

Would you rather complain about what you don't have than take what is offered to you, claiming what is right in front of you? Instead of taking what was offered to meet his need, Naaman complained it was too easy, not too difficult.

That doesn't make sense, until we look at some of our own problems where we might have refused the solutions. I want to stop hacking every time I cough, but don't ask me to give up cigarettes. I want to lose weight, but don't ask me to give up ice cream. I want a closer relationship with my spouse, but don't ask me to give up the remotes, or let go of some incident I can bring back up later in an argument. I want peace in my soul, but don't ask me to forgive my neighbor. I want a healthy relationship, but don't ask me to get counseling. I'd like to help people in poverty, but wait until I've finished paying for my plasma. I'd like to know God better, but don't ask me to try any of those funny spiritual practices. I'll tell you my need, but I won't listen for your answer.

Naaman wanted to be cured. He had tried everything he knew to do. So, granted, he

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did seek help. But the simplest of all the instructions made him feel pitiful, not powerful. All Naaman had to do was dunk himself in a river. Finally, he did it. But to get to that place of healing, he had to listen to some very unlikely people – first, his wife, then the personal assistant of a foreign prophet, and finally his servants. He had to listen and follow the advice of people he was too important to listen to. Humility, trust, and asking for help. The rest was a simple gift. But we all know how hard it is to receive a gift that has no strings attached. No one is really that virtuous that they don't want something in return.

It makes me think that what is needed for the grand vision of spiritual wholeness in all aspects of human life -- body, mind, conscience, emotions, reason and will... This grand vision is simple grace. To get over ourselves. To follow the path to spiritual wholeness requires humility, the kind of humility that is finally willing to listen to what is offered, sometimes by someone we don't want to listen to, something as necessary for us as it was for Naaman, the mighty man who wants to follow some seemingly unintelligible instructions of Elisha instead of just washing up. What else did you hear in the story? That he brought so much money, thinking he might need to buy some of that healing? That grace is for sale?

Maybe we think life is hard and should be hard. Or perhaps we assume that life should be a straight-line experience leading to happiness and wholeness. Life is almost

never a straight-line experience, but rather is filled with innumerable conundrums but through which we find grace in the simplest ways – through humility, trust, and asking for help from unlikely sources.

That's the grace of God – and it's that easy.