

“Washed Clean – Naaman”

2 Kings 5:1-14

When we look at how the world works, it seems pretty simple. The world lives by the rule of the survival of the fittest. The world works because might makes right. The world follows the Golden Rule – the one with the most gold makes the rules. It can seem as though the rich and powerful can throw their money and might around and get what they want in ways that common people can't. It happens today, and it happened in the past. Fortunately for us, that's not how God works.

That's how Naaman thought the world worked. A general of one of the most powerful empires of the day, he had been defeated not by an opposing general, but by a debilitating disease. Leprosy. A skin disease which, if left unchecked, would ultimately kill him, and would make him an outcast if it became public knowledge. And after trying everything he could to get cured himself, Naaman is finally desperate enough to listen to a slave girl and go to her nation, and a prophet of her God, and find a cure there.

Naaman couldn't leave Syria without the king's permission, and he also needed an official letter of introduction to Joram, king of Israel. After all, Syria and Israel were enemies, (and the arrival of the commander of the Syrian army could be greatly misunderstood. Both Naaman and his king assumed that the prophet would do whatever his king commanded him to do and that both the king and the prophet would expect to receive expensive gifts in return. That's how they thought the world worked. That's how their world works. But it's not how God works.

Naaman comes laden with unheard of riches, (the equivalent of \$4.5 million of gold, and \$260,000 of silver) to buy healing, first going to

the king, then to the prophet Elisha. But Naaman is unable to buy the favor or healing from God. The king cannot do anything to help Naaman, and even sees this as merely a pretense to justify war. So he passes the buck to the prophet Elisha.

Elisha knew that Naaman had to be humbled before he could be healed. Accustomed to the protocol of the palace, this esteemed leader expected to be recognized publicly and his lavish gifts accepted with exaggerated appreciation, because that's the way kings did things. But Elisha didn't even come out of his house to welcome Naaman and his entourage. Instead, he merely sends a messenger, who tells him that he need do nothing more to be healed than to wash seven times in the River Jordan.

But that doesn't make sense to Naaman. Tellingly, a man who has proven himself in the crucible of war, who had done whatever was necessary to climb his country's political hierarchy, is outraged at the notion that something so mundane, so easy could bring him what he desperately yearns for. Naaman assumes that healing will require him to prove his strength and overcome a difficult challenge. Even more, he's outraged that it involves bathing in the Jordan River, not one of the more beautiful rivers of his homeland. He thinks he's been disrespected, and gets angry. The basic cause of his anger was pride. He had already decided in his own mind just how the prophet would heal him, but God didn't work that way.

It turns out that love has a price, just not what Naaman thought. The price is not measured in gold or silver or ten changes of clothing. The price is measured in the humility of having to go bathe not in the great rivers of Syria or

buying a great spa treatment, but bathing in the dirty, unimportant Jordan. The price is measured in something coming not because of an order backed by the threat of an invading army, but a gift freely given. To quote D. L. Moody, “He lost his temper; then he lost his pride; then he lost his leprosy; that is generally the order in which proud rebellious sinners are converted.”

Even after his servants talk him into taking Elisha’s cure, the disease-free Naaman insists on expressing his gratitude according to the logic of power: by lavishing some of his wealth on Elisha, who steadfastly refuses to accept such compensation but does let Naaman take some dirt to build an altar to the true God. In his second request, Naaman showed unusual insight, for he realized that the king would expect him to continue his official acts as the commander of the army. This included accompanying the king into the temple of Rimmon, the Syrian equivalent of Baal. Naaman was willing to perform this ritual outwardly, but he wanted Elisha to know that his heart would not be in it.

Naaman is only mentioned once in the New Testament. When Jesus preaches at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, he reminds them that God is not just for them, but God is a God of all people. “And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian” (Luke 4:27 NKJV). Naaman was a Gentile and the commander of the army of an enemy nation, so it’s no wonder the congregation in Nazareth became angry with Jesus, interrupted His sermon, and carried Him out of the synagogue to throw him off of a cliff. After all, why would the God of Israel heal a man who was a Gentile and outside the covenant? He was an enemy who kidnapped little Jewish girls, and a leper who should have

been isolated and left to die. But that’s not how God works.

When we look at the Hebrew of this story, though the words used unveils a profound meaning. God used a na‘arah q’tannah (“young girl/lady”) to lead this powerful Gentile man to have skin like a na‘ar qaton (“young boy/man”). The greatest becomes like the least in these cleansing waters. Baptism, like the Jordan, is the great equalizer. No matter who we are as we enter those waters—powerful or vulnerable; rich or poor; famous or unknown—we all emerge the same: as children of God. The simple water and strong word wash away the disease of sin. We are clean, holy, and all part of the same family of our Father.

But the God who can scatter armies and bring down royalty also shows his power by meeting the impossible needs of ordinary existence. When he bathed in the Jordan, Naaman joined a socially diverse company of anonymous people helped by Elisha, like those whose stories make up 2 Kings 4: a widow saved from hunger and debt by something as basic as jars of oil; a much wealthier woman, whose son is raised from the dead; famine-stricken prophets kept from starving to death. He joined with those who would be later washed clean in the waters of the Jordan, including Jesus himself when he’s baptized by John. God’s power is revealed most clearly not in the conquests of generals and the majesty of kings, but in liberating the poor, feeding the hungry, and healing the sick.

As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “God through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18). When Jesus came into the world, He came to end the alienation between God and people. He did that throughout his ministry, including when he was baptized in the Jordan, but ultimately it happened through his dying on the

cross for us. With that, God reached down to us. The cross bridges the gap between God and each of us created by sin. That's why so many church steeples are topped with a cross. Not just so that the cross can be seen, but so that we remember how the God on high came down to us and crossed that gap.

The cross marks the end of separation. The end of separation because of sin, the end of separation between us. Any categories that we can think of to divide ourselves into: conservative or liberal, red state or blue state, city people or country people, rich or poor, young or old: whatever those categories are, they no longer divide us. Instead we are united into one body, the Body of Christ.

The Body of Christ extends throughout the world. The body of Christ extends out to share the picture of a time when all peoples will gather together to feast and celebrate with God. Celebrating a unity based in the God whose grace gathers together all of us. God's love can never be bought, never be earned. And yet, in spite of the cost, or even because of the cost, it is freely given. Freely given by a God who loves us and will never stop loving us.

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