

Greatness

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

2 Kings 5:1-14; I Corinthians 9:24-27; Mark 1:40-45

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We learn something about Naaman right off the bat in our Old Testament lesson. We learn a most important thing—that Naaman is a most important man. In fact, this army commander for the Aram nation is a **great** man. Naaman is a mighty warrior, and highly valued because Naaman has brought victory to Aram.

That's pretty much what greatness consists of, at least for people of Aram (which is part of present-day Syria) and people of the other nations in the Middle East. Israel and Aram at the time of this story (c. 850-840 BC) have been at war off and on for years. So, naturally, greatness is equated with military might, with political power. Naaman is a great man.

Ironically, the writer of 2 Kings leads us to know that the victory Naaman achieved over Israel was due to the Lord God. I could discuss how Israel of the Old Testament came to understand its defeats as God's turning away from Israel due to its disobedience and faithlessness, but that would take me down another road that is not ours to go today. The point is that Naaman, at the start of our story, has no idea that the greatness he thinks he possesses is due solely to the Lord God's activity, not Naaman's. And as the story proceeds, it becomes clear that what Naaman and those around him perceive as greatness is not that at all.

Now, for all Naaman's wartime achievements, he suffers a weakness that is readily visible to all who meet him. He has some kind of skin disease—"leprosy" was the general term in those days to describe a host of rashes and disfiguring illnesses—and while it did not deter Naaman from leading an army into glorious battle, it did temper his greatness a bit. It was enough of a disability to provoke others to want to do something about it. I'm sure he got his fair share of advice and home remedies. Only the leprosy just wouldn't go away. That's Naaman's situation. If anything, his disability probably made him cling to his military might all the more, savoring each victory, more boastful with every engagement, to compensate for the stares his skin disease invited.

What exactly does greatness consist of? You know, those of us who are parents are often engaged in the struggle of instilling in our children particular values. Some are secular values, but nonetheless, our Christian faith speaks richly to them. We try to teach our children integrity, cooperation, hard work, compassion, service. The problem is that the world equates greatness with a set of values that may not align with the values I just named. The status of greatness is accorded to people for some rather interesting accomplishments. And the status of greatness is so prized that some rather interesting things are done to maintain it. Thus our children—and we ourselves—can become confused between the values we try to teach and the reality of the culture in which we live that consistently thumbs its nose at those values.

Now I'm certain that, as Aaron Scott grows, his parents will share with him their faith in God, teach him about the love of Jesus Christ, and show him what it means to live by the fruits of the Spirit in discipleship. But it will be difficult some days. In particular, how is a young boy, eventually growing into a young man, to learn about greatness when what he sees in the world is selfish impulse, deception, greed, and abuse of power? I'm not saying that it's any easier to raise a girl and help her grow into a young woman, but I'll tell you, the cultural role models of greatness for young men are pitifully few.

For just when you think you have a few men you can admire and look up to as people dedicated to excellence—healthy role models for the next generation—you find out they knowingly used steroids, partied hearty with pot. An Alex Rodriguez, a Michael Phelps—tarnished a bit in our eyes. We have some explaining to do to our children about how people acquire greatness and then deal with it and maintain it. Of course, I figure A-Rod and Michael have some explaining to do as well. Oh, there have been words of remorse, an attempt to have us understand why things went the way they went. But it's not because they're so honest. It's because they got caught. And I suppose they just want things to go back to normal. Well, we can't expect perfection in our fellow human beings. That's impossible this side of the kingdom. But I believe our society's concept of greatness has been perverted into the misshapen figure of celebrity.

Yet it's not just the athletic world. Our clinging to greatness, the rush we feel with power, can lead any of us to misuse our authority. Pastors and other church leaders, teachers, counselors, doctors, police officers, coaches, CEO's, political leaders—how many stories have we read of those in positions of power who abuse the trust granted them, who assume their greatness makes allowance for transgressions?

Naaman thinks he can process into town, bearing royal trappings with pomp and circumstance, and thus get an audience with Elisha, the prophet of Israel, who, no doubt in awe of Naaman, will instantly whip up a grand healing because Naaman the Great desires it.

Then we'll all forget about the annoying little skin disease, the youthful exuberance with a bong, the simple desire to hit more home runs, the sexual abuse of others under the guise of therapy, or the thousands of dollars in tax evasion (isn't everyone doing that?).

You know, Mark's Gospel has something to say about greatness. Pity we didn't read **that** lesson today. In the 10th chapter of Mark, the disciples James and John ask Jesus to do something for them. They want his promise that they will sit, one at his right hand, the other at his left, when he comes into his glory. They want a share in his greatness. Jesus tells them they simply don't understand what it is to be great. He knows the prevailing culture says kings and rulers lord it over others—that's how the world views greatness. Then he adds, "*But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.*" That is greatness, which Jesus demonstrates with his life. Jesus demonstrates greatness with a humility he willingly assumes for the sake of the whole world.

Now, Naaman has trouble dealing with humility. As do many of us. He equates it with humiliation. But they're not exactly the same thing. Humility before God is not humiliation before God. Rather, it is a willingness to put aside our own power and authority, and live under the authority of the Lord. Submit ourselves to a life lived in **his** greatness. That's **obedience**—following God on the holy path God wishes us to walk.

When Elisha doesn't jump at Naaman's swaggering, doesn't even lift a finger to heal Naaman, but instead suggests Naaman go and wash himself in the Jordan River, Naaman is angered. He feels slighted that he hasn't been accorded the respect such a great man as he should receive. He's offended that the little Jordan River is to be his place of healing, when surely it should be at a more magnificent setting like one of the well-known rivers in Aram.

It takes someone used to humility to convince Naaman to humble himself. His own servants finally have to say to him, why don't you just do what the prophet suggests? Why are you turning up your nose at such a simple opportunity for healing?

So he does humble himself in that humble river. And a miracle happens. We read that Naaman comes out of the water clean and restored, with skin like that of a young child. But, what's more interesting is what happens in the verses that follow. Naaman goes back to the prophet Elisha and proclaims in front of all his men this confession of faith: "*I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel . . .*" He returns to Aram, but he is changed. Naaman understands the greatness of the Lord God, and now he lives under that authority.

Today, Aaron Scott has come out of the water clean and restored. He too is now a child of God, made new for a life of humility and faithfulness, integrity and obedience, service and compassion and love. These are fruits of the Spirit in his life. These are values taught and modeled by his parents and grandparents. These are the many aspects of a holy journey he will take as the years go by, and you and I are to join Aaron on the path. **AMEN.**