

2 Kings 5:1–14; Mark 1:40–45

Grace to you, and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

This morning I was listening to a radio show that I only occasionally catch, called “On the Media.” But in this particular show they were discussing the current story, that of the Merrill Lynch / Bank of America merger. The interviewer made the observation that at Merrill Lynch there was a rather large percentage of fund managers (I don’t remember the exact number, but it was over 1,000) who make, or at least MADE, a salary of over \$1,000,000 per year. Now, according to the person that was being interviewed, this was a ‘relatively’ recent event, that’s only been so for the last decade or so. (I’ll have to confess, my salary is not near \$1,000,000 per year). But because of their occupation (that is to say, finance, or specifically Wall Street), these fund managers were making increasingly larger and larger salaries and bonuses, even while last year Merrill Lynch posted over a billion dollars in losses. But these managers, these fund managers, felt they were entitled to those salaries, even while the stocks were falling, and the funds they were managing were falling faster than that plane that landed in the Hudson river a couple of weeks ago. They felt they were – or even ARE – entitled to their bonuses, even though those bonuses ended up being paid for out of the government “bailout” program (yes, I know, NOW there are restrictions in place, but when Merrill Lynch received their financial bailout, those bonus restrictions were not yet in place). Those fund managers wanted those bonuses because they felt – or at least as the interview went – they were *entitled* to those bonuses.

It struck me that I think that is almost what Naaman must have felt like when he approached his king. What does he say? He said, “I have learned that there is a prophet in our opponent’s land who can cure my disease.” And so the king of Aram – or Syria as we would know it – the king sends a letter to the king of Israel saying “Cure my servant.” Where does he get off with an attitude like that? So when the king of Israel receives this letter from the king of Aram, that’s exactly what the king of Israel says. “Who does he think I am? He’s trying to pick a fight. Does he think I’m God to be able to cure anyone?”

Namaan is a military man. He’s a leader in the country of Aram. The king of Aram is, well, he’s the king of Aram. Their positions bring them certain, shall we say, expectations, privileges, advantages. They say jump, you jump first, and you ask how far later. So when Naaman presents his letter to the king of Israel, he expects results. He expects those results now. He is, at least, willing to pay for them, but he does expect results. So, what he does *not* expect is what happens when he goes and encounters Elisha, the prophet of God. He goes to Elisha. Elisha doesn’t even come out of his house. Elisha sends a servant out to go tell the mighty military leader of Aram to go take a bath. This does not sit very well with the mighty military leader of Aram because he’s the mighty military leader. He expects to be treated – he’s *entitled* to be treated – in a certain manner, with a certain amount of respect. And he storms off. “Are not the rivers in my home country better than this stinking little creek down here? I’m not going to go wash in that creek.” And I find it so interesting that’s it a servant who comes up to Naamaan, a servant probably similar to that little girl at the beginning of the story who goes to Namaans wife. This girl who was captured on a raid and tells Namaans’s wife about Elisha the prophet. A similar servant comes to Naamaan and says very humbly, and calls him “my father.” “My father,” verse 13, “My 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?’”

The man who is probably the number two man in the entire country, and the servant, which one has the better sense? Once that sense of entitlement that Naaman has, once he's able to take that arrogance and put it aside, the light comes thru. Naaman goes to the river, washes and is made whole.

It's different in our Gospel Lesson, isn't it? In our Gospel Lesson we have a man who approaches Jesus. He doesn't appear to do so out of arrogance or entitlement. What did it say in verse 40?

⁴⁰ A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him,

Now, there is a little bit of presumption there, because as you all remember from reading through Leviticus several times, and you know it by heart, back in Leviticus, chapter 13 it gives the various laws. Chapter 13:

The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." he shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp. [Leviticus 13:45-46, NRSV]

So, this man just by approaching Jesus is, indeed, a little arrogant because he is breaking the Law of Moses, but he comes to Jesus and he humbles himself before Jesus. (Another thing we need to remember is that our scriptures keep talking about leprosy but what they mean by leprosy isn't necessarily what we in the 21st century mean by the disease where your nerves die and your digits start to get infected and fall off your body. That's called Hansen's Disease. In scripture, when they're talking about leprosy it can be any kind of skin ailment. It could be a large, visible birth mark. It could be Hansen's Disease. It could just be if you had splotchy skin? Any of those would be considered leprosy.)

But all that aside, this fellow approaches Jesus, he humbles himself, and he puts it back on to Jesus: "If you choose, you can make me clean." (1:40)

Do you remember how Elisha reacted to Naaman's arrogant demands? He didn't even come out of his tent. What does Jesus do to the humble request? Does he tell him to go off and do something grand? Does he even tell him to go wash? No. Jesus replies to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him. What a difference between the arrogance of entitlement and honest humility.

Now, as a believer, and perhaps I should say more emphatically, as a baptized believer, we ARE entitled to something. We are entitled to God's grace. We are entitled to God's love. We are entitled to God's forgiveness. We are entitled to those things because of the cross. We are entitled to those because of the life given on the cross. We are entitled to those because of the blood shed on the cross. We are entitled to those because of the Love sacrificed there on the cross. And did you note: not a single one of those things I just mentioned are anything that you or I did or can do. We ARE entitled to those things, but not because of our own good works. I am entitled to those but not because of the great deeds that I accomplish or because I wear a funny looking collar, or because I give copious amounts of money to the building fund or take part in every single, solitary worship service we have here at Trinity. We are entitled to God's grace – each and every one of us – because of Christ. And that's the best – and I think only – entitlement of all. Amen.

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