

"The Use and Abuse of Power"

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany – Lectionary 6
8:30 and 10:45 a.m. Sunday, February 12, 2012
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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Mark 1:40-45

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

Slip a crisp \$10 bill to the restaurant maitre d' and ensure a table by the window on a busy Valentine's Day evening. Remind the college admissions officer that Uncle Harry was a financially generous alumnus and guarantee an acceptance letter will make its way to Uncle Harry's great nephew. Need to resolve a problem? Don't talk to the receptionist—insist you want to see the manager. And be sure to introduce yourself to the new folks in the neighborhood who appear to be well-heeled professionals—wouldn't it be great if they joined your social club, your non-profit foundation, your church?

None of these actions is particularly scandalous. This is how the world works, and everyone knows it. Use power and influence, and get what you want. Associate with the powerful and the influential, and good things come your way. Surely no one would fault us for these actions—they're such a common way of being in the world that we don't even think twice about them.

Naaman didn't think twice. Naaman had power, and he used it. Naaman was a great army commander whose many victories brought him an excellent reputation. In his capacity as commander of the army of Aram, he collected the spoils of war for his own amusement—wealth was plundered, and the little people of other nations were subdued, becoming slaves for his purposes. That's the kind of power he had.

He would've been at the top of his mark if not for one small glitch. He had a skin disease. Not bad enough to keep him from doing his job, or keep others from obeying, but bad enough to make this mighty warrior falter in confidence. The skin disease simply didn't match up with everything else in his powerful persona.

So when a powerless Israelite slave girl, captured and now serving Naaman's wife, happened to mention to her mistress about a prophet back in Israel who could rid folks of such skin maladies, Naaman was intrigued. After speaking with his king, who wrote a letter on Naaman's behalf, the mighty warrior with horse and chariot, with ten talents of silver, 6,000 shekels of gold, and ten sets of richly-appointed garments, went forth to the king of Israel. Overkill perhaps, but Naaman wanted to make certain his **demands** for healing were met. Remember: When you use power and influence, and go straight to others who also have power and influence, you get what you want.

The funny thing is, healing did come his way, but not by the influence he brought, or the power he wielded, or by the powerful people he went to see. Healing came in the name of the LORD God through powerless people like that slave girl who mentioned the prophet in the first place, and the humble servants under Naaman's command who

convinced Naaman to listen, and especially Naaman's own eventual submission in an obscure little river out in the middle of nowhere. When Naaman let go of his power and influence, and stopped looking to powerful, influential people, healing came.

And he would never be the same. Oh, he remained a mighty army commander, but now he believed in someone mightier still. If you continue on in the book of 2nd Kings, beyond verse 14 where our lesson ends, you'll see Naaman proclaimed the God of Israel as the one true God. And he proclaimed this, not while towering over the prophet Elisha from the height of his horse-drawn chariot, but while standing face to face with this prophet as a new and fellow believer.

I know this letting go of power flies in the face of everything we are taught in life for getting ahead. It's counter-cultural. But the way of Jesus Christ is counter-cultural. He was born into a family with little means. He surrounded himself, not with folks who could help him climb the social ladder, but with a group of simple, mostly uneducated disciples. He had a heart of compassion for those who lacked voice or status or money or power. He reminded those disciples, and those folks who came to him, and us, that when we lose our life, we gain it. Such confusing, counter-cultural words, yet that's precisely what Naaman discovered in his humility before the LORD God: Losing who we think we are in order to become who God created us to be.

But I have to say that the way of Jesus is not **just** about letting go of power, of taking on humility. It's clear that Jesus walked a path that actually did **battle against** power—power that was evil, power contrary to the kingdom of God. Look at our Gospel lesson, and how Jesus responds to the leper. While Naaman's skin disease didn't prevent him from moving around in his social circle, the laws of Judaism at the time of Jesus clearly took issue with skin diseases of all types. Pretty much lumped them into one disease—leprosy—and labeled a leper as impure. A leper was expelled from society, from participating in worship in the synagogue and temple, from sharing at the table with their families and friends. Because it was believed that contact with them would render others impure, the leper became *persona non-grata*, isolated and alone, avoided and ignored. If they were fortunate enough somehow to be healed of their disease, they still had to jump through hoops to satisfy the religious leaders, with special sacrifices to atone for that disease. There even were rituals for cleansing the house of a leper that involved throwing away stone and plaster, doing new masonry work and replastering. But the truth is, it was well-nigh impossible for a leper to enter society ever again, to have access to the LORD God ever again.

And Jesus was **angry** at that powerful religious system of so-called purity laws that drove people into hopelessness and despair. Here is a story that shows Jesus' anger. Our translation doesn't do justice to the depth of our Lord's anger, but it's there. This leper comes out to find Jesus (good thing Jesus was traveling in between towns, where there were places without a bunch of people around, or else the leper wouldn't have reached him). And Jesus has more than just "pity" for him—the word really describes his strong visceral reaction at the sight of the suffering leper. Jesus doesn't just "feel sorry" for the man, but he is moved by compassion to act, to change the situation, to stand side-by-side with this leper and confront powers that are unjust, unloving, and unyielding. To actually touch the leper, and defy the system that says Jesus also will become unclean in doing so. Then, after Jesus heals the leper, our reading says Jesus "sternly warns him..." Again, not exactly clear wording here. Actually, it says that Jesus

snorted like a horse in indignation. Jesus is angry, fed up with how his people—God’s people—are oppressed and downtrodden, lack access to the mercy of God, lack good shepherds to guide them daily in their faith. We’re still in the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark, and already Jesus is angry that the religious leaders have strayed so far from the intent of God’s good commands. Jesus is set to shake up those powers, doing battle against them with his whole being.

Is it time for us to be indignant, like our Lord we claim to follow? Is it time for us to do battle against powers that are evil? Is it time for us to so choose, like our Lord, to heal and protect and welcome in those most under the thumb of power gone awry? Ben Witherington writes this in his book about Mark’s Gospel: “If we are not angry about some sort of evil in society, and doing something about it, how well are we listening to God’s word? Could that be a way of looking at cheap grace—a grace that doesn’t produce anger within us at the injustices and evils and unfairness in society; a grace that doesn’t motivate us to do something to seek to remove such problems from people’s lives?” (Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark*)

Remember that \$10 we choose to slip to the restaurant maitre d’? We could so choose—instead—to take that \$10 and buy a malaria net through the Malaria Campaign of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We could do that, and do battle against poverty and disease. And then we’d be saving a life, not just a seat by the window.

AMEN.

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