

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany – Lectionary 6

5:30 p.m. Saturday, February 11, 2012

The Reverend John H. Brock

Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

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.

Some of you here tonight probably know our musician for tonight Tom Notestine. He's filling in for Ryan, who is off at a family event. Tom's been here with us many times on a Saturday night, and always does a wonderful job. You might not know that not only is Tom a fine pianist, he is also the organist and choir director over at St. John's Lutheran in

Shiremanstown. But wait, there's more! In addition to being a wonderful musician, Tom also works here at Trinity, up in the office. He's the person who keeps all of our membership records straight; he's the working end of our monthly newsletter (the editor gives him all the articles and he's the one who formats them and gets them off to the printer). Whenever you receive a mailing, it's because of Tom and his wonderful talents. But, the reason that I very much appreciate Tom, *the* most important thing that he does - at least from my point of view - is he puts together our weekly Saturday night bulletin.

I usually try to get to him, several weeks in advance, the list of who all is going to be helping with worship, what the readings are, and with Ryan and Jeff's help, usually what hymns we're going to

sing. This past Wednesday morning he questioned me about our first reading. He said, "So this is the third week in a row you're going to be not using the Old Testament reading?" I said, "What do you mean? Of *course* we're using the reading from 2 Kings." "No," he said, "In the list you gave me it says that we're reading from 1 Corinthians." I said, "No, we can't do that," because I was so excited about talking about this wonderful story with Namaan. So fortunately for all of us Tom saved us from my oversight (well, it's good for me, hopefully it's good for you). Because, as I was preparing this lesson, another pastor, Evan Houck from Grace Lutheran in Highland Park, pointed out a very cool dynamic that I had not caught before with our two passages tonight. But before I talk about that let's take a quick look at the passages themselves.

First of all in our reading from 2 Kings, there is a long list of characters that we need to try to figure out. First there is the unnamed king of Israel, probably a guy named Jehoram, but that's not all that important. A quick reminder: that at this point in history the kingdom of Israel, after King Solomon passed away, the nation broke in two. The geographically larger Northern kingdom was called Israel, and they were led by a series of military rulers. The smaller Southern kingdom was called Judah. Judah is ruled by descendants of David. The advantage (from their point of view) for Judah, was that Judah has Jerusalem. Judah has the Palace of the King and has the Temple that King Solomon built. So to continue in our story, we have this unnamed king of Israel (the northern kingdom). We have a prophet, or a man of God, called Elisha. Now prophets are allowed more or less to wonder

back and forth between the two kingdoms. The prophets are the people who speak for God to the people. There is an unnamed king in Aram, which today would be modern day Syria, so it's right next door, bordering on the northeastern edge of the kingdom of Israel. And finally, in our cast of characters, we have Aram's commander in chief, a man named Namaan.

Namaan has a skin disease of some kind. At this point in history, "leprosy" is the name that they pretty much refer to for any kind of a skin disease. It could be Hansen's Disease, what we know as leprosy, where nerves die and tissue rots on the body. It could also mean the person was an albino. It could mean that they had psoriasis; it could be a really prominent birthmark. It could be a really bad case of acne. The word "leprosy" was this panacea

for any kind of skin disease. In Namaan's case, since he's a military leader, and because later on he complains about that Elisha didn't put his hand on the spot, it's probably not what we know as leprosy. He probably has something more like a birthmark or psoriasis or something like that. Because he's a military leader, so he needs most of his fingers to be able to hold a sword or to shoot a bow and arrow. He needs two good strong legs to go into battle. So like I said, it's probably some type of skin blemish, more irksome than debilitating.

Regardless of what exactly his issue is, his wife has an Israeli servant girl, and this girl makes a passing comment to her mistress, "Oh, if only my lord were with a prophet that was in Samaria, he would cure him of his leprosy" (Samaria is another name for Israel). So, being a good wife, she passes that

message on to her husband, who in turn passes that little tidbit to his boss, the king. The king of Aram decides that he wants his commander cured. So he writes a letter to the king of Israel, in which he pretty much demands that the king of Israel cure his military leader. The letter basically says 'When you receive this letter, I expect you to heal my man Namaan of his leprosy.'

The king of Israel gets this letter. He reads it and he goes into a funk because he believes that the king of Aram is trying to start a war. Not only is he trying to start a war; he's put his own general right there smack dab in the middle of Israel (because he's sent Namaan with the letter), so he's ready to pull out all of his hair because, the king of one country is demanding the king of another country to do an impossible task.

Now somehow or other, Elisha (the man of God) gets word of these happenings. He probably has the proverbial 'ears in the court,' someone on the inside who is telling him what's going on in the royal court. Elisha sends word to the king of Israel, "Don't worry about this Namaan situation. I'll take care of it."

So Namaan, all proud and important, with his huge entourage, shows up at Elisha's place. He does at least observe the custom and he stops at the gate because he's a gentile and so he really shouldn't enter into Elisha's home. Still, he **does** expect all of the pomp and circumstance, and show and tell, and trumpets and bells and bowing and toe kissing that he experiences at home. Except, Elisha doesn't even open the door. Elisha sends out a messenger, a servant, who tells Namaan, 'Go and wash in the

Jordan seven times and you'll be cured.' As you might expect Namaan is not pleased with this. Namaan is expecting fanfare; he gets nothing. He's expecting at least a face to face; and he's pretty much ignored. Namaan wants something big: a laying on of hands, hocus pocus, maybe some heroic deed that he has to go and do; but instead, he's told to go and wash in a muddy little creek (because the Jordan River is really more like the Conodoguinet than it is the Susquehanna).

Namaan storms away, spouting threats and insults, until some slightly cooler minds prevail. One of his servants takes the bold move to approach him, calm him, appease him, and finally get him to go and wash in the Jordan. And behold! Namaan is made clean.

Now let's contrast those events really quickly with what we heard in Mark's gospel. Jerusalem in the first century is roughly 800ish years since the whole Namaan and Elisha event happened. A beggar comes to Jesus. Now he's a beggar, because in *his* society, if you have leprosy (again, the same kind of definition for leprosy), you're not allowed into the cities, or to be around other folk. You have to remain separate from the public. And you are **absolutely** not allowed to go up to someone, especially an important someone, and start to talk to them. What happens, though, is that this beggar comes up to Jesus - he comes to Jesus directly, not through any middle man. He comes up to Jesus, kneels down in front of Jesus and says, "If you are willing, you can cleanse me."

Jesus *knows* he is not supposed to talk to this guy, or touch this guy, really, to do anything more than maybe drop a couple of coins in his cup and then just walk away, walk away. However, Jesus, moved either by compassion or anger (it's one of those Greek words that can be translated either way), Jesus reaches out and he touches this man and he says, "I am willing, be clean." And *immediately* whatever the skin disease this poor man had is gone. He's healed. He's healthy. He can interact with others in society. He can try to find a new job for himself. Eventually. First, he needs to go and show himself and get a certified clean bill of health from the local priest, because the local priest would have known indeed that he had been a beggar suffering from leprosy. But once he gets that official okay, once he gets the "Good Housekeeping" seal of approval there, he's good to go. Jesus gives him

just one proviso: he's not to say anything to anyone. Which, of course, he promptly ignores and he goes around telling everyone and anyone who will listen to him exactly how it is that this Jesus cleansed him.

I don't mean to give Namaan a bad rap. In our reading tonight it cut off the story right after Namaan got healed, and he indeed in the very next verses does go back to Elisha's house, and he gives thanks and apologies and asks for forgiveness, all of which is given. But there are some striking differences in these encounters, and this is what Pastor Houck had pointed out to me earlier this week. What's the difference? Well Namaan is 'big man on campus.' He is expectant, he is demanding, he is privileged. In his mind, he *deserves* to be healed. The beggar -- the beggar is trailer trash, humble, asking, maybe even afraid. Elisha is this

man of God; he is authoritative, he's showing the power of God with a simple command, go and wash. He's not going to touch, he's not going to get involved, he's not showing any sympathy. Jesus is the Son of God. He, too, is authoritative, yet he shows compassion, or maybe anger at the illness or the societal apathy for those in less fortunate circumstances. But Jesus, unlike Elisha, reaches out and touches. Jesus is intimately involved in this man's healing.

The two men, the general and the beggar; both are healed. Both are made whole by the power of God. One is humbled by his experience. The other is emboldened to proclaim what it is that happened to him. Two men, prophet and Messiah; both are sent by God to bring healing and the word of God to all people. Both are instruments of healing. One, kept

his distance and he was kept clean. The other got a 'hands on' experience.

I fear that all too often I approach God more like Namaan at the beginning of the reading: brash, expectant, and self-deserving. And while I know that God will hear me, and I believe that God will answer me, I also believe that God would much rather I approach like the beggar: humble, obedient, requesting.

I have to say that this isn't quite the sermon that I thought I was going to give at the beginning of last week, and thanks again to Tom for correcting my mistake. I do like to preach from the Old Testament, and there are lots of good stories in the Old Testament, and I think I am a fairly good story teller. Tonight, though, it's not the story that's

important. Rather it's how we apply the lesson, this lesson of *asking* rather than *demanding*. This lesson, of humbleness rather than self-deserving. This lesson is about how we take these lessons and apply them to our daily life. These lessons are about how we take these lessons and write them on our hearts. It's how we take these lessons, and live them out every day.

Amen.

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