



“Living with Gratitude: Receiving Mercy”

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saturday & Sunday, October 12–13, 2019

All Services

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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c; Luke 17:11-19

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

We're dealing with a couple of really great Bible stories today. But there's just so many things that need to be unpacked, as one of my seminary teachers would say. Let's start with 2 Kings.

Naaman is the general of the army in Aram. That's more or less modern-day Syria, to the north and slightly east of modern-day Israel. Aram is an enemy of Israel & Judah.

Naaman has leprosy. In Biblical times, that simply means has a skin condition of some kind. It could be what we know as Hansen's disease, where nerves die, flesh rots and parts of the body fall off. It could also be bad acne, psoriasis, a birth mark, or even an overabundance of freckles.

We don't know to what degree Naaman suffers leprosy. What we **do** know is that one of his wife's servants is a Hebrew, and that young woman tells her that there is a prophet back in her home country who could heal him. Our reading skips over a couple of plot twists (so go home and look up those verses, they're kind of humorous in a sit-com sort of way), but Naaman ends up in front of the prophet Elisha's home.

Remember, Naaman is a military guy. He is accustomed to giving orders and being obeyed and receiving orders and doing what he is told. He is also a commander, so he is used to being treated deferentially.

We don't know for certain what Naaman was expecting when he shows up at Elisha's home, but judging by his reaction to what transpires, I'm guessing that he figured he would be ushered into the presence of the prophet, be given the respect and honor due someone of his stature (he is, after all, the commander of the army, and a representative of the King of Aram), and then, probably, either be instantly healed, or, possibly, be given some heroic, majestic, and awe inspiring act in order to *prove* his worthiness to be healed.

Instead, what actually happens, is that he is greeted, *not* by the prophet; *not* by the man he has come to see; *not* by the representative of his enemy's king; *not* even by The Prophet of Lord God Almighty. He is greeted by a mere lackey, a messenger of the messenger of Lord. Naaman is accustomed to **Respect**. He is used to being paid

attention to. And this . . . unnamed *spokesperson*, who is not even the prophet himself; but is rather an underling of an underling of his enemy's king; this *subordinate* tells him, Naaman, this mighty, military commander, to go wash himself. In the river. Like a commoner. Are you **kidding?** We can almost hear him scream: Do you not *comprehend* who I **am**? I. Am. Important.

So now, let's compare that reaction to Luke's story. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. (Actually, several chapters in Luke's gospel take place on the way to Jerusalem). Jesus is north of Jerusalem, between Samaria and Galilee (so modern-day northern Israel - pretty much the same general geographic area as our first reading). While he's there, he's approached by a group of lepers.

In New Testament times, those who were thought to be lepers were not allowed in towns or cities, so they were basically condemned to live in the wilderness, and therefore often banded together for safety (safety in numbers, you know).

This group approaches Jesus & his crew, crying out "have mercy on us." They probably were hoping for alms: money, food, or possibly some clothing. *Maybe* they were asking Jesus to heal them, there aren't really enough clues in this story to know for certain they were asking to be healed, or just to get some food. Instead of giving them money or food, though, Jesus tells them to go present themselves to the priests (because a priest has to pronounce someone as "clean" if they have ever been declared to be a leper).

On their way to see the priest, they realize - *whoa!* -they have been healed. They are once again *whole*. They can reintegrate themselves into society. They can strive to live a *normal* life. They can go back to their families. They can *Rejoice!*

Which one is it, though, who returns to give Jesus thanks? A Samaritan. And I think it's difficult for us, today, twenty-first century North Americans, to fully comprehend how Israelites felt about Samaritans. To first century Israelites, Samaritans are the illegal Muslim immigrants of Israel. That a *Samaritan* leper was hanging around with a bunch of Israelite lepers simply goes to show how **bad** life was for lepers in the first century. It's kind of like a Steelers fan being surrounded by Eagles supporters, but in a Very Negative way.

The only person who comes back to show his appreciation is this . . . Samaritan. And Jesus, in what I *really hope* was a snarky tone, says "What? Weren't there ten? Where's everybody else?"

We can, *maybe*, if we're feeling *generous*, say that the former lepers were so excited to be reunited with their families, that they headed home directly, or that *maybe* they continued on to the priest, to get the official declaration of being "clean." But it's only the Samaritan who comes back to give Jesus thanks.

It's a bit of a contrast, isn't it, between the Samaritan leper and Commander Naaman? Grace and mercy was shown to both of them. Not much, really, is asked of either of them: Naaman, simply go wash in the river; the Samaritan, go show himself to the priest.

The Samaritan does what he is told. Naaman, the military man, the guy whose DNA is programmed to obey, he's the one who balks when he hears his orders. *He is commander of the Army! He is Aramean! He is a Man! Who is this inferior, low ranking, petty prophet think he is, by **not** greeting Naaman himself, and then telling him to go wash in the stinking Israeli river?*

Fortunately, Naaman does, eventually, listens to one of his own underlings, who convinces him:

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'? (v. 13)

When Naaman does go and wash in the river (I'm sure moaning and grumbling all the way), and discovers himself

his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean. (v14b)

To give him credit, he *does* return to Elisha's home, and acknowledges the grace and mercy shown to him.

Here's what struck me, though, as I was reading these lessons: I really think that **all** of us are the lepers. All of us. Maybe not with the actual skin stuff. But with the *spiritual* stuff. All of us, each of us, as Paul says in his letter to the Romans,

All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23)

All too often, act like Naaman. Too often, when presented with God's grace, we are proud, arrogant, rude, self-important. Too often, when I'm criticized, or given an opinion I don't agree with, I want to respond to with:

I am a called and ordained minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and I have been for over twenty years. I have served four different congregations, in three different states. I have a master's degree. I know stuff!

Too often, I want to be just like Naaman, and prove my worthiness. Too often, I know that I am **right**, and my critics are absolutely **wrong**.

So why can't I be more like that Samaritan? That illegal Muslim immigrants Samaritan, who does what Jesus tells him, without asking why, without getting arrogant or nasty or rude.

Why is it that I, why is it that we, *always* feel like we need to be right? Why do I, why do we, struggle with accepting God's grace and love and forgiveness?

And why do we, all too often, take out our frustrations on one another?

Why are we all so bad at receiving God's mercy?

Amen.

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