

HURTING AND HEALING

Our Old Testament lesson for today is the story of two very different lives that were entwined in an unexpected way and it has a lot to teach us about pride, humility and salvation.

The story begins with a man named Naaman who was the commander of the Syrian army and a young Israelite girl.

Naaman was a renowned warrior, a man of valor, and a sworn enemy of the Israelites.

He enjoyed high favor with the king of Syria since he had defeated Israel's armies in battle and delivered Israel into the hands of the Syrian king.

The Israelite girl had been taken hostage and brought back to Syria where she was made to be a servant to Naaman's wife.

Today we would call her a victim of human trafficking.

Sometime later, Naaman contracted leprosy.

Leprosy is a terrible disfiguring disease that causes lesions to grow all over the body and destroys the nerves under the lesions.

In its later stages, lepers can lose their fingers and toes and ultimately, their lives.

One might think that the Israelite girl would have taken some degree of satisfaction in seeing this happen to Naaman; she could hardly have had warm feelings for her captor.

But does she keep silent, and gloat inwardly?

Quite the opposite: she suggests to Naaman how he might be healed, based on her faith in the God of Israel—the very God who had allowed the Syrians to conquer her country.

“Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.” (2 Kings 5:3)

How was it that this girl was able to retain such a generous spirit after being treated so cruelly—even to the point of wanting to help those responsible for her pain and her loss?

What kept her from becoming bitter and angry?

The answer was humility and love.

She had been relegated to a lowly position in which she was forced to serve the enemies of her country, but instead of allowing her position to inflame her with resentment and hatred of her enemies, she accepted her humble position, saw a human need and responded to it with love.

So Naaman, in his desperate need to find a cure for a loathsome disease, reported what she had said to his king.

The king of Syria then told him, *“Go now, and I will send a letter to the king of Israel.”*

So Naaman went, taking with him a large amount of silver and gold because he assumed that since what he needed was a miracle he would have to pay a lot for it.

As a pagan, he subscribed to the credo of “you get what you pay for,” and Naaman was prepared to pay a lot to anyone who could get rid of his leprosy.

The idea of receiving a gift from God (or more likely “the gods” in his case) was alien to him because his pagan religion was founded on the idea that “you get what you pay for” and “there’s no such thing as a free lunch.”

If you wanted something from someone you had to offer them something in return and if you wanted something from the gods you had to offer it first.

He didn’t realize that no amount of money could buy a miracle: you could only receive one as a gift from God.

So Naaman took his king’s letter and his silver and his gold and set out for Israel.

The letter read as follows: *“When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you Naaman my servant, that you may cure him of his leprosy,”*

Now when the king of Israel read the letter he saw only political danger in it.

He said, *“Am I God to kill and make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? ...he is seeking a quarrel with me.”*

The king “tore his robes” in anger and frustration.

When Elisha the prophet heard what had happened, he sent word to the king, saying, *“Why have you torn your clothes?”*

Let him come now to me that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel.”

So Naaman took his entourage of horses and chariots and all his gold and silver and went to the house of Elisha.

But before he even got to Elisha’s door, Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, *“Go and wash in the Jordan seven times and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.”*

Well. Naaman was shocked.

He felt disrespected and humiliated.

After all, he was Naaman, the famous warrior and man of valor who commanded the army of Syria and it seemed to him that he had been treated like Rodney Dangerfield.

He had expected the prophet himself to come out and meet him and wave his hand over him and effect a miraculous cure.

Instead a mere messenger had shown up and told him to go jump in the river.

The small, muddy Jordan River!

Naaman muttered, *“Are not...the rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel?”*

“Could I not wash in them and be clean?”

He went off in a rage.

It's been said that you can't humiliate a person who's already humble.

To humiliate someone is to bring them down from a high perch and a humble person doesn't think of himself as occupying a high perch so there's nothing to bring him down from.

He may experience disappointment or even anger from unmet expectations, but genuine humility helps a person have realistic expectations of themselves and others.

It's different with an arrogant person.

An arrogant person has set himself on a high perch and there is a lot of room beneath him.

Naaman thought of himself as big stuff and all it took to bring him down was a messenger with a message.

But as he went away from the house of Elisha, Naaman's servants respectfully spoke some sense to him:

“My father, it is a great word the prophet has spoken to you; will you not do it? Has he actually said to you, ‘Wash, and be clean?’”

Their pleading brought Naaman around: he dipped himself seven times in the Jordan and was cleansed of his leprosy.

Not only that—he was cleansed of his paganism.

He returned to Elisha's house and this time was met by Elisha himself.

He said to Elisha, *"Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel; so accept now a present from your servant."*

But Elisha replied, *"As the Lord lives before whom I stand, I will receive none."*

Then Naaman said, *"If not, please let there be given to your servant two mules' load of earth, for from now on your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god but the Lord."*

Two loads of dirt?

Sounds like a strange request, but it's not really so strange.

Naaman wanted the soil to build a foundation for an altar to the one true God—and he wanted the soil to come from the land where the one true God was honored.

He knew that when he returned to Syria he would be surrounded by people who were idolaters and didn't honor the God of Israel.

He wouldn't be able to avoid the company of these idolaters, but at least he would not be worshipping with them.

In fact, their idolatry would serve as a constant reminder to him of what the God of Israel had done for him.

Elisha's final word to Naaman was a blessing: "*Shalom.*" Go in peace.

Naaman had been humbled and more: in addition to receiving the gift of humility, he was saved.

With the help of his servants, he accepted the prescribed cure and underwent a sevenfold baptism that not only cleansed his flesh but redeemed his soul.

His first response was to pay Elisha for what he had done, but Elisha made it clear that it was the Lord and not Elisha who had cured Naaman.

He also made it clear that God's miracles—like his love and forgiveness—are not for sale: He only gives them away.

Naaman became a believer.

It is amazing how much this story tells us about the spiritual realm.

Throughout the Bible, leprosy is used as an example of all that is wrong with this world and with us.

What the Bible calls sin is actually a spiritual disease that—like leprosy—can disfigure us, cause us terrible suffering, and finally lead us to the grave.

Just as leprosy destroys the nerves along with the flesh it consumes so that lepers don't actually feel pain in their infected parts—so does sin work in the lives of the unredeemed.

It slowly devours their souls but they don't even notice it because it deadens their consciences as it goes about its morbid work.

Ultimately, of course, it leads to death—not just the physical death that everyone experiences, but eternal suffering in a lake of fire.

Like any infectious disease we need to be cleansed of it.

But only God can cleanse us of our spiritual leprosy.

And His cleansing is not visible to our worldly eyes—we know it only by faith.

As long as we think of it as a physical cleansing in a physical world, we will remain skeptical because although we have been told that we have been cleansed—we don't necessarily feel clean.

You can take a bath in apple juice but you will still end up sticky.

Our physical sins still cling to our physical flesh—even after we have confessed them and repented of them.

No matter how much self-discipline we try to exercise, our sins keep coming back.

They stick to us right up to the grave when our physical bodies go back to the dust from which they were formed—taking the stench of our sins along with them.

Many a Christian has lamented this fact.

“I know God has forgiven my sins and I am grateful, but I still commit them day after day.”

Sure, I come to church and say the confession: *“I, a poor miserable sinner, confess to you all my sins and iniquities with which I have offended you....”* but it doesn’t seem to be enough.

I say the words but how much feeling do I put into them?

Do they really come from my heart?

Shouldn’t I mean them more than I do?

It seems so ordinary, so commonplace.

Kind of like jumping seven times into the Cuyahoga River.

How much good can THAT do?

The answer is: a lot.

In fact, everything.

God’s solution to the problem of sin was not to take it out of our lives, but to forgive it.

So, yes, our sins are still there—***but they are forgiven!***

In God's eyes they are gone like Naaman's leprosy and our spirits are as clean and smooth as the skin of a child.

One final note: did you notice that every good thing that happened to Naaman came from a servant?

The Israelite girl who told him of God's healing powers through the prophet Elisha was a servant.

The messenger who brought him instructions for the cure for his leprosy was a servant.

And those who counseled him to be humble and follow the prophet's instructions were servants.

As Jesus told his disciples, "*Whoever would be great among you must be a servant.*" (Matthew 20:27)

Lord, please make us all your servants.

Amen

