

II Kings 5:1-14 ¹Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. ²Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³She said to her mistress, 'If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.' ⁴So Naaman went in and told his king just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. ⁵And the king of Aram said, 'Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel.' He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. ⁶He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, 'When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy.' ⁷When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, 'Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.' ⁸But when Elisha, the prophet of God, heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, 'Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.' ⁹So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. ¹⁰Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, 'Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.' ¹¹But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, 'I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! ¹²Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?' He turned and went away in a rage. ¹³But his servants approached and said to 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"?' ¹⁴So Naaman went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the prophet of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

II Kings 5:1-14

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"Simple Solutions"

Rev. Amy Terhune

One of my favorite commercials first started making its appearance a few years back. It's an ad for a cell phone, and in the ad, a father is sitting in his chair reading the newspaper, and his son is sitting on the staircase behind him talking on his cellphone to his girlfriend. Clearly, the young couple is in that nauseating period of an adolescent relationship when their conversation is so incredibly sappy that it's almost unbearable. They are discussing who is the better listener. "You are. No, no, you are. No, *you* are!" And then the boy says, "I wrote a song about what a good listener you are", and he proceeds to sing the most pathetic, uninspiring, off-key, made-up ditty: "...you are such a good listener..." It is the look on the father's face as he overhears all this that is priceless—rolling his eyes, shaking his head, it is one of just cringing resignation. The voiceover on the commercial then says: "You can't control the conversation, but you can control the cost." As advertisements go, it's effective, primarily because it's funny.

But control is a serious topic – One that's been in the news this week in the wake of Supreme Court decisions. What kind of control can the EPA exercise over polluters? What kind of control does a coach or teacher have over the prayer life of students in their care? What kind of control does a woman have to terminate a pregnancy? It's a deadly serious topic these days, and one at the heart of today's lesson. There comes a time in each of our lives when we are forced to recognize that we are not in control of all that much, really. In the second book of Kings, we meet a fascinating character, Naaman, who is

learning that lesson the hard way. He discovers, perhaps for the first time in his life, that while he can control an army, he cannot control his own cellular chemistry. It seems that disease does not respond to his orders the way his soldiers do, and he is really thrown for a loop

I have a lot of sympathy for Naaman. I mean, he transfers right into 21st century America. He's at the top of his game. Scripture says he's great man and in high favor with his master. He is the commander of Aram's army—he's the general. There's only one person higher than him in the ranks, and that is his friend, the King. Naaman is aristocracy, he's a household name, he's on the Wheaties Box and the cover of Fortune 500. He's got everything in the world, but...

"But our "mighty warrior" is a leper. Now understand something here: the people of that day did not have the repertoire of illnesses that we have labeled and named today. Anything that was life threatening and showed up on the skin was called leprosy. His ailment was probably not the disfiguring, nerve-destroying leprosy we know today as "Hansen's Disease," for he is not barred from any contacts or activities because of his condition." [from "Our Magnificent, Mysterious, Mischievous God" by David E. Leininger, www.Sermons.com.] He has face-to-face access to his king. That said, however, whatever he has is taking over his body, and the world around him can see it. Whatever it is he's fighting, he is—for the first time in his life—losing the battle.

And then this servant girl speaks up—she doesn't even get a name, and she could be a whole sermon unto herself. Who knows what she has seen, lived through. She taken captive during a battle, torn from her family, perhaps witnessed their deaths. She is now the servant, the slave, of the General of the enemy's army. Human nature being what it is, she ought despise him, want to see him suffer as she has. But if she had those feelings, she didn't act on them. She submits herself to the essence of faith—love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. She is as powerless as Naaman is powerful, as low on the social ladder as Naaman is high, but she knows what he doesn't—her God, the God of Israel—is Lord of the universe. He is in control and He can cure what no one else can. David Leininger notes that "...it is a measure of Naaman's desperation that he would bother to listen, much less act on a slave girl's suggestion." [from "Our Magnificent, Mysterious, Mischievous God" by David E. Leininger, www.Sermons.com.] But he does. And with the blessing and the aide of the King, he sets off to find the Prophet of God. And this is where the story gets gripping.

Now when I was a kid, I learned that this story was about healing—and it is, to a certain extent—a wonderful, miraculous healing. But that really isn't the depth of the message. At its heart this story demands that we admit we are not in control. At its heart, this is a lesson in obedience.

In our world today, obey is often treated as another four-letter word. That's because obedience means not only recognizing that one entity has power over another, but actually condones the inequality and the power imbalance. That goes against the grain for us. We live in a society that holds up equality among all peoples as the ultimate ideal and expression of freedom. We're celebrating that this weekend. Obedience has taken on a negative connotation. We like to cooperate and participate. We like to be a team player. We like to give or to serve or to help or to fulfill our job description. But we do not like to obey. I'll bet that very few of your employers use that term with any of you even though they clearly expect that you will do what is required or asked of you. I need to say this: our faith today is crippled by our discomfort with obedience.

Let me be clear about what that means, because I don't want to be mistaken for saying something I'm not. Obedience requires relationship. It is a heart matter. Now you may think that sounds strange, but hear me out. It is a heart matter, because it necessarily involves respect for someone else. Now that respect may originate in fear or in love, but either way, it's respect. In society, we obey the rules of the road when we're driving. Why? Because we're in a relationship—we are all connected to one another. When we obey the rules of the road, everyone benefits. But one can obey for various reasons. One car stops at a stop sign because the driver doesn't want to get a ticket and pay a fine—that is fear-based obedience.

Another car stops at a stop sign because that driver doesn't want to hit anyone and cause undue suffering to self or others—that is love-based obedience. And statistics show that the latter kind make better drivers. Both of them obeyed the rules of the road, but only one of them obeyed the true purpose behind the rules—the wellbeing of all.

Years ago, a friend of mine looked me in the eye and told me it was wrong for me to go into the ministry because Scripture says a woman shall not speak in church. She may have been obeying words written down on paper, but I felt in myself a call to be obedient to the purpose Scripture was written in the first place—that is, to advance the Kingdom of God. I am convinced that part of the reason we feel such distaste for the word obedience is because we have come to associate it with power and rules and punishment. It has come, all too often, to mean blind, unquestioning obedience. But true obedience is a loving response to something bigger than we are—be it society, or office, or organization, or God—and in so responding, we become a part of a force for good. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “one who breaks an unjust law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.” In a very real sense, he was using different words to express the same idea. Rather than advocating blind obedience to rules, he is advocating loving obedience to the noblest of ideas, the real fabric of society. Obedience, as God intended, is not rote response. In what seems like a great contradiction, true obedience is willed, chosen, undertaken, purposeful subjugation to the power of love and the good of all. It is a conscious admission of the fact that we're not in control. And yet, it is the willingness to use what we can control – ourselves and our gifts – to purposefully be part of something greater than we are.

Naaman doesn't get that—not yet. He suffered the discomforts of obedience. It's almost comical to picture this scene. Naaman shows up at Elisha's house with this huge train. Scripture says that he came bearing ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. Besides this, he's got animals, servants. He's the King's right hand man—he shows up in a motorcade, y'know? So he must have attracted attention—the whole town is gathering, gaping, whispering. “Psst, that's the general of the enemy's army. He's come to Elisha for treatment.” And what happens? He goes to see the specialist, and never gets past the receptionist. Elisha sends a servant out to meet this hot shot. “Go wash in the Jordan 7 times, and you'll be good as new.”

Now, Naaman has already swallowed his pride to come to the enemy for help. And then he gets this slap in the face—no respect, no acknowledgement. He's not just mad—Scripture says that he is enraged. He is irate! He's been insulted, mortally offended. He's reached his limit—pride reasserts itself. And not only pride, but his plans. “I thought this is what would happen: He'd come out, pay me due respect, wave his hand, make a big show. We'd have another photo shoot, we'd go home!”

He turns to leave, infuriated—probably making plans in his mind to come back and wipe out the city before he dies—when another servant speaks up. “Father,” says the servant. They call him father. There's obviously a trust between them. In fact, Naaman is prepared to listen to those beneath him. Perhaps that's part of the reason he is so successful. “Father,” they reason with him. “If he'd told you to do something difficult, you would have done it. So why not obey when the instructions are so simple?”

It is often true that the simpler the command, the harder it is to obey. Friends, the reason that learning to obey is a part of spiritual discipline is because it is so difficult. It involves discernment. Sometimes, it's not clear. And it involves a leap of faith. If one has an idea about how something is going to be, it's really hard to put that idea away and do it someone else's way—especially if the reasoning isn't clear. Naaman had to make that leap.

My mind strays to another who had to make that leap. He was a teenager named was Daniel. But I'm not referring to anyone in scripture. Instead, I refer to an iconic movie from my youth: *The Karate Kid*. Daniel has come to Mr. Miyagi—an older Japanese man—for instruction in Martial Arts. Mr. Miyagi makes a pact with Daniel. “My job is to teach, your job is to learn. You do what I say.” Daniel

agrees. But when he shows up for lessons, he is given a pair of round sanding blocks and told to sand the deck in a circular motion. It takes him all day, but he does it. The next day he returns, only to find that instead of lessons, he is to paint the fence, up and down, long strokes. It takes all day, but he does it. He returns the following day, and still no lessons. Instead, he gets to wax the cars—wax on, wax off, in a circular motion. It takes all day, but he does it. The next day he comes again and Mr. Miyagi isn't there, but a note is pinned on the door: Paint the house, side to side, long strokes. Well, Daniel gets mad then. He's supposed to be getting karate lessons, and instead, he's become Mr. Miyagi's personal fix-it man, going to bed sore every night. But to his credit, he does it. He paints the house. Then, to add insult to injury, when Mr. Miyagi comes home that night, after Daniel has spent the whole day working hard painting the house, it's clear that the old man has been fishing. That's the last straw. Rankled by the seeming injustice of it all, Daniel unleashes a tirade on Mr. Miyagi, who listens patiently until the boy runs out of steam.

Only then does Mr. Miyagi speak. "Defend yourself," he says to Daniel. Even as he makes a move to attack Daniel, the old man barks orders, "Sand the deck!" Instinctively, Daniel makes the movement for sanding the deck, thus blocking the attack. Suddenly, the boy realizes that the repetitive motion of waxing the car, sanding the floor, painting the fence—these are the movements he will need to defend himself in Karate. And through the tasks, his muscles are hardened and strengthened. It doesn't make any sense to him until Mr. Miyagi forces him to draw on those movements that have been drilled into him. Through obedience to the simple, the menial, the seemingly pointless, he is prepared for the more difficult task that lies ahead.

In our scripture lesson, Naaman is once again persuaded by the voice of one beneath him – a voice he could have rightly ignored. But the mark of true leadership, true ingenuity, true compassion is found in those willing to listen to marginalized voices – the powerless, the vulnerable, the lowly. Once again, he swallows his pride, and he makes his way to the Jordan, which, by the way, is a muddy, yellowy, shallow, meandering, kind of lazy stream. It never gets much deeper than about 3½, maybe 4 feet. It's not a particularly impressive river as rivers go. In his finery, he wades out into the Jordan—his servants and the townspeople watching from the shore—and he submerges himself. One time, to wash away his anger. A second time, to wash away his pride and arrogance. A third time, to wash away his preconceptions. A fourth time, to wash away his towering self-reliance. A fifth time, to wash away his sin. A sixth time, to wash away his desperation. And a seventh time, to wash away his leprosy.

Naaman isn't comfortable with obeying—with admitting he's not the one in control. But he does it, and his life is saved. Hundreds of years later, Jesus would note in Luke chapter 4, as he is preaching to his hometown of Nazareth that there were hundreds of lepers in Israel, but only Naaman—a gentile—was cured. Why? Because he was able to admit his own preconceived notions—"I thought this would happen"—and then put them aside and simply follow instructions—menial, routine, seemingly pointless instructions. And even more than that, he was willing to listen to voices of those who served him; voices he could rightly have chosen to ignore. And through the simple, he encounters the profound. He finds healing and hope and a future. If you want to find what Naaman did, listen to the voices around you, let go of your own projected outcomes, and look to see what God might be doing. We don't have to be in control to be free. We don't have to be in control to affect change. We don't have to be in control to see healing and hope. Control is not power. Faith is power. Hope is power. Love is power. Get comfortable with obeying the call of those things, and you will see God work. Amen.