

¹ Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his king and highly regarded, because through him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. ² Bands of raiders from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³ She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." ⁴ Naaman went to his king and told him what the girl from Israel had said. ⁵ "By all means, go," the king of Aram replied. "I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing. ⁶ The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy." ⁷ As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!" ⁸ When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: "Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel." ⁹ So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. ¹⁰ Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed." ¹¹ But Naaman went away angry saying, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. ¹² Are not the rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage. ¹³ Then Naaman's servants went to him and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed'!" ¹⁴ So Naaman went down and immersed in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a child.

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

All: Thanks be to God!

II Kings 5:1-14

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"When Things Don't Go As Planned"

Rev. Amy Terhune

Some of the most profound precepts we ever know come clothed in very basic and elemental forms. A "Peanuts" cartoon strip shows Charlie Brown visiting Lucy who is at her stand offering psychiatric help for a nickel. Charlie says, "I need help! Tell me a great truth – something about living that will help me." Lucy responds by asking, "Do you ever wake up at night and want a drink of water?" "Sure," Charlie responds, "quite often." Lucy then offers her advice, "When you're getting a drink of water in the dark, always rinse out the glass first because there might be a bug in it! Five cents, please." Charlie pays, and walks away saying, "Great truths are even more simple than I thought they were."

Another illustration of this is a mother telling of overhearing a conversation between her two daughters. The younger one had been having considerable frustration trying to learn how to know

which shoe went on which foot. "Listen," said the older girl to the younger, "I'm going to tell you something and I want you to remember this the rest of your life. Do you promise to remember this for as long as you live?" The younger girl meekly promised, "Yes." The older sister said, "Okay, here it is. Whenever you put on your shoe, if it hurts, you've got it on the wrong foot!" [from "Naaman is my Name" by Barbara Brokhoff, www.Sermons.com.]

Our lesson from scripture this morning is like that: profound and deep, but simple, basic, even logical. It begins with Naaman, the general, the commander of the army of Aram, which is essentially modern-day Syria. In those days, Army Generals were major heroes, sort of like professional athletes in today's world. 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. Interestingly, scripture tells us that through him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The Lord has given him victory over Israel – over God's own chosen people. Why? The Hebrews tell this story to show how God works beyond what we expect or plan for – that God moves to show love and grace in ways none of us see coming.

Things don't go as planned for Naaman. Mighty in battle though he is, our warrior general is also 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 Naaman isn't used to losing.

In those first few verses, we're also introduced to a nameless young girl for whom things have also not gone as planned. In an ideal world, she'd be home in Israel, perhaps preparing to marry and begin a life and family. Instead, we're told that she's been captured – carried off by a foreign army and pressed into slavery to the wife of the enemy's star general. It's quite likely that she's seen her father and brothers wounded or killed, her sisters taken into slavery too, her home burnt to the ground, her community left in ruins. The scripture doesn't tell us, but that's usually what bands of raiders would do. 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. There she is, all alone in this foreign household, and 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 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.

Supplied with extravagant gifts and a letter from his king, Naaman returns to the land he has just conquered, to the king he has vanquished, looking for healing. The King of Israel, probably Jehoram, , thinks this is a trick to set him up for further armed conflict. And he's rightly upset, for the letter from the King of Aram instructs the King of Israel to cure Naaman's leprosy. Now, how Elisha hears about all of this, we don't know. But it strikes me as a little ironic that a slave girl in captivity knows what the King of her own people does not – that there's a prophet in Samaria with enormous power to heal.

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. Obedience, we think, is for dogs and horses, and maybe children in certain circumstances, but not for us.

Yet the truth is that obedience is a choice. It's a willingness to accept that we are not all powerful, and that subjected our personal will to a greater calling. Obedience should not be blind or unthinking. It should be chosen. Consider this: a driver who obeys the rules of the road in order to avoid tickets or fines will break those rules if the threat disappears. Speeding, running red lights, parking in no parking zones – people who obey only out of fear will do these things if there's no cause for fear. On the other hand, people who obey the rules of the road out of care for other drivers don't need to fear authorities. They follow the rules because they understand that the rules make driving safer for all of us. These folks make better drivers.

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. To obey 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 – a motorcade that must have attracted attention—and 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—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.

"In his book *How Life Imitates the World Series*, Dave Bosewell tells a story about Earl Weaver, former manager of the Baltimore Orioles. Weaver had a rule that no one could steal a base unless given the steal sign. This upset Reggie Jackson because he felt he knew the pitchers and catchers well enough to judge whether or not to steal. So one game he decided to steal a base without a sign.

"He got a good jump off the pitcher and easily beat the throw to second base. As he shook the dirt off his uniform, Jackson smiled with delight, feeling he had vindicated his judgment to his manager.

"Later Weaver took Jackson aside and explained why he hadn't given the steal sign. First, the next batter was Lee May, his best power hitter other than Jackson. When Jackson stole second, first base was left open, so the other team walked May intentionally, taking the bat out of his hands. Second, the following batter hadn't been strong against that pitcher, so Weaver felt he had to send up a pinch hitter to try to drive in the men on base. That left Weaver without bench strength later in the game when he needed it.

"That moment was turning point for Reggie Jackson. He was only thinking about his part, but Weaver was looking at a bigger picture. Jackson learned to obey the signal. [4 ¶s from an illustration by Marty Masten on www.Sermons.com.]

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 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. When things don't go as planned, he doesn't give up. He accepts a change in course. 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.