

"You're Welcome"  
2 Kings 5:1-19    Luke 17:11-19  
October 9, 2022  
York Center Church of the Brethren  
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Naaman was a big deal. A very big deal. He was a war hero; a close advisor to the king of Aram (modern day Syria); he was wealthy and admired by the people. He was a powerful man, a mighty warrior. He had led many successful military campaigns- including against Israel. But for all his power and wealth there was one thing he couldn't conquer. Scripture calls it leprosy- it was some kind of skin disease that was probably annoying, maybe painful, and definitely not socially acceptable. Naaman could control every other aspect of his life- except for this- the most intimate and personal part of his life- his own skin.

On one military excursion into Israel Naaman brought back a "souvenir" for his wife- a slave girl. The child watched the great general struggle with this disease. Although she was a captive in their home, she told his wife of a prophet in Israel who could heal him. The word of a child, a slave at that, sends the great man to Israel, enemy territory.

It is important to be aware of the political ramifications of this journey. The Aram army was responsible for killing King Ahab of Israel. The two nations had a fragile truce that could be disrupted at any time. It is into this atmosphere that the king of Aram sends his most trusted commander with a letter for the king. Naaman not only brings a letter, he also brings: 1,000 pounds of silver, 150 pounds of gold, and ten sets of clothing. His entourage likely consisted of chariots, war horses, and well-armed soldiers. It was a procession of power.

Into this serious situation of international intrigue- scripture inserts humor. Didn't the slave girl say there was a **prophet** in Israel who could heal Naaman? So why did the king of Aram send a letter to the king of Israel saying, *"When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent my servant, Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy."*

When he read the letter, the Israelite king freaked out! "It's a trick," he cried. "When I can't heal this man, the king will attack us!" It was a ridiculous and dangerous misunderstanding.

The real prophet of Israel, Elisha, heard about the king's distress and sent him a message. *"Why are you freaking out? Did you forget about me? All you must do is send him to me and I will show him that our God is the One with the real power."*

So Naaman and his parade go to Elisha's house. I can just picture Naaman, sitting high up on his powerful horse, wearing all of his military medals, while all of the chariots and horses and soldiers line up behind him, an impressive and fearsome sight. And then someone comes out of the house.

Naaman thought it would be the prophet himself, but it was a messenger from the prophet. "Go wash yourself in the Jordan River seven times and you will be cured." And then he turned and went back into the house.

*"Wait a minute!" Naaman shouts. "Do you know who I am? Where is the prophet? I demand that he come out here and stand in front of me and wave his hands and call on the name of the Lord and cure me!"* Naaman expected some razz-ma-tazz befitting his status and reputation. He expected a show of healing power worthy of his greatness. He was doubly insulted when the prophet's remedy was for him to wash in the river. *"Are you kidding me? Why would I set foot in that muddy swamp when we have such magnificent and beautiful rivers back home?"* He was furious. This is not what he was expecting. It was not what he deserved. He was accustomed to unquestioned obedience and bows of honor.

Once again, it is the voice of a servant who speaks truth to power. *"If he had given you something difficult to do, you would have done it, wouldn't you? He gave you something simple, so what does it hurt to give it a try?"*

Surprisingly, the war hero did as he was told, washed in the Jordan River seven times and when he walked up the bank of the river, soaking wet, his skin was healed, and looked as new and unmarked as that of a child.

That sounds an awful lot like baptism, doesn't it?

His arrogance quickly dissipates as he rushes to Elisha and not only thanks the prophet in front of his whole entourage, but he also expresses his belief in the God of Israel. The great leader acknowledges one even greater than he. He embraces the God of his enemies. He offers Elisha gold, silver, and fine clothing from his treasure trove but the prophet refuses. "God's gift of healing is not for sale. It is a gift."

Then Naaman makes, what sounds like an unusual request. He wants to take soil from Israel with him back to Aram so he can worship God on holy ground. He also asks for forgiveness in advance. One of his duties is to accompany his king when he goes to worship his god in the house of Rimmon.

Naaman wants Elisha to know that he is only doing his duty to the king and is not worshiping this false god. Elisha sends this man of war off with a simple and profound message, "Go in peace."

Happy ending? Not so fast. This story doesn't end there. The next few verses tell about Elisha's servant, Gehazi, who overhears the prophet refusing Naaman's generous offer of payment. He thinks to himself, "*Elisha let this guy off too lightly by not accepting the gifts he offered. I will take care of that.*" So he follows the procession out of town, stops the general, and tells a lie about needing money for guests. Naaman gives him double what he asked for. When the servant gets back to Elisha's house the prophet confronts him about his greed. He lies again and Elisha curses him and his descendants with Naaman's leprosy.

This story is filled with twists and turns. Those who are great in the eyes of humans; those with the most power and privilege are shown to be powerless and clueless. Those with no power have the answers that are needed to find healing. Once again, we see the power of God working through human agents to bring wholeness to one in need. The fact that the one in need is a feared enemy is not to be overlooked.

Elisha knew who this man was. The prophet didn't ask for anything in return for the healing; he didn't make the soldier promise to stop attacking Israel, he just introduced him to God's healing power and sent him on his way. To receive this gift the great man had to get down off his high horse and submit to the simple instructions of one much less important than he.

When you look at the harsh reality of international politics of that time (and even today) it is remarkable that Naaman found healing through the God of Israel. The Aramean's had killed King Ahab of Israel after all. They were dreaded enemies. The current king of Israel was terrified when this war hero turned up at his palace. He could only be bringing trouble. Naaman had run out of options for healing in his own nation. No one in his world could help him. He was a hopeless case until he found the God of hope through Elisha.

This God is so powerful that Naaman can be healed long distance- Elisha didn't even see or speak to him before he was healed. The prophet kept himself out of the scene so the focus would be on God and God alone.

I like to think that Naaman returned to Aram a changed man- inside and out. I like to think he gave up his war games and returned the slave girl to her home in Israel. She is, after all, the initiator of hope in this story. Her role is pivotal. Had she not spoken to Naaman's wife, the general would never have been healed. She is a captive and yet she is the one who sets Naaman on the path to freedom. His healing was in her hands.

We hear nothing more of Naaman in scripture until Jesus speaks his name in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus is preaching his first sermon in his hometown of Nazareth, and he is **not** getting a warm welcome. He is criticized for not performing miracles for them like he did in another town, so he tells the people that prophets are not welcome in their hometown. He criticizes their unbelief.

Then he says, "*There were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.*" That comment enraged the people, and they ran him out of town and tried to throw him off a cliff. How dare he lift up an enemy as having more faith than them!

Jesus had a habit of surprising people as he does when confronted with ten men with leprosy. He and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem when a group of lepers called out his name. "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

In those days there was hardly anyone needier than a leper. They were victims of various contagious skin diseases and because they were considered unclean by the Jews they were kicked out of their homes, families, towns, and religious communities. They had no one and no place to go so they banded together in groups and begged for money. They lived in colonies on the outskirts of town and had to keep their distance from righteous people.

When Jesus approaches, they call his name and they say, "Master." Luke is the only Gospel writer who uses the title, "Master," for Jesus. And in all other instances it is used by those identified as his disciples or those about to become disciples. How did the lepers know who he was?

He gives them an unusual command. "*Go show yourselves to the priest.*" That was it. No words of healing, no grand display of God's power. He didn't even tell them to wash in the river seven times. Just-- "*Go show yourselves to the priest.*" As they went on their way, they were made clean, they were healed.

In the Law of Moses, the ritual for welcoming a healed leper back into the community was quite clear. The leper didn't go to the doctor for a clean bill of health. They went to the priest and if the priest concluded that the person was indeed healed of their disease, then and only then could they resume their life in the community.

With just a few words Jesus sends the lepers on their way to the priest and before you know it, they are no longer lepers. Can you imagine how they felt when they realized that their disease, their curse, was gone? How did they feel when they realized that they were no longer outcasts, no longer unwanted, no longer isolated? They must have been ecstatic and couldn't wait to go home and see their loved ones.

I am sure they were all grateful but only one saw his unblemished skin, stopped in his tracks, turned around, ran back to Jesus, dropped to his knees, praised God in a loud voice, and thanked Jesus. What a beautiful scene!

While Luke's listeners were basking in the warm glow of this grand show of gratitude at the feet of Jesus, Luke slips in a stunning statement; just one little added description of the grateful former leper. "And he was a Samaritan."

This would have been as shocking to Luke's audience as it would be to us if he had written, "And he was a member of Isis" or "And he was a white supremacist." The shock factor cannot be overstated here. Even though the Jews and the Samaritans were actually cousins, related historically and ethnically, they hated each other. Orthodox Jews considered Samaritans to be heretics. They didn't mix- ever. A Jew would walk miles out of their way to avoid any contact with a Samaritan. Any mention of a Samaritan in a good light would jolt the religious and ethnic sensibilities of a faithful Jew. And that is why the Gospel writers included so many encounters between Jesus and Samaritans- including this one.

The assumption in this story is that the other nine lepers were Jews. So, the fact that the only one who ran back to thank Jesus and praise God was a hated outsider is a pretty big deal. Jesus calls attention to this by saying, "*Wait a minute. Weren't there ten of you? Where are the other nine? Is this foreigner the only one who can say thank you?*"

In defense of the others, I would say they were doing what Jesus told them to do. He told them to go to the priest, so they went to the priest. I think Jesus' point is that the tenth leper, the Samaritan, the hated outsider, went above and beyond what Jesus told him to do. And not only did he go back and say thank you, but he also opened himself up to a relationship with the God of Jesus. And I think that is the whole point of the story. The man is blessed again when Jesus says, "*Your faith has made you well.*" The Greek word for "well" also means "saved," "whole." Your faith has made you whole.

Two needy men- two outsiders- two lepers- two grateful men who found that not only was their skin healed of its blemishes and sores, but their souls were healed as well. The ultimate outsiders became models of faith and chose to be worshipers of God. The tenth leper and Naaman learned what it meant to be embraced by grace; to receive the

gift of life. They didn't earn it, they didn't deserve it, but when they received it, they recognized it and were grateful.

God's desire for each of us is that we are whole, and well, and reconciled with God and with each other.

*"Now I know,"* said Naaman. *"Thank you,"* said the tenth leper.

May it be so with us. Amen.