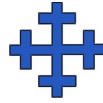


St. Mary of the Harbor

Provincetown, Massachusetts



Pentecost 4 C Proper 9 2019

The Very Reverend Terry R. Pannell

2 Kings 5:1-14 *Naaman, 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. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And 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. He 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." When 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."

But when Elisha the man 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." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." But 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! Are 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. But 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'?" So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

The Most Powerful People in the World

From what I can tell, there is a lot more talking going on these days than listening. Maybe it's because the people doing most of the talking are looking for validation rather than enlightenment. That runs contrary to what scripture has to say about such things. According to Proverbs, a person who listens receives the gift of wisdom and a heart inclined toward understanding.¹

Listening to people, especially those whose voices are often overlooked, can open a person's eyes to a new way of seeing and being in the world, something a fellow named Naaman learned when he begrudgingly acted on the advice of an unlikely agent of God's grace. Naaman was a legendary commander, an advisor to the king and a champion of the Aramean people. His reputation as a warrior earned him the admiration of his nation and the respect of his foes. Naaman was one of those people who was accustomed to being listened to. If he said jump, people would ask, how high?

By all measures, Naaman was a powerful man. Being powerful though, does not mean you are invincible. Naaman suffered from a skin disease that was literally eating away at him. And though he had access to the best physicians and the wealth to pay for treatment, nothing he had tried had worked. That's when a young Jewish slave girl mentioned to Naaman's wife that he might want to look for a cure someplace else.

It is rather ironic that a captive pre-adolescent foreigner was the key to healing the very man who had deprived her of her freedom. She may have been a slave, but Naaman was really the one who was captive. More than anything, he wanted to be disease free. But that meant setting aside privilege and power and listening to the voice of someone who didn't count for much in the eyes of most people.

I am not sure which was more humiliating: taking the advice of a Jewish slave or the demeaning treatment prescribed by a foreign prophet who wouldn't even receive the exalted commander when he showed up at his door. Failing health though, is a powerful incentive. Naaman may not have liked the prescription, but he was at the point he would do just about anything to be healthy again. The question is, are we?

Being physically and mentally sound doesn't you are disease free. There are other diseases that deprive people of life. I would be willing to bet that most people have something that is eating away at them. For a number of Americans, it is the fixation with politics in this nation. While such things may not manifest themselves in physical ways, they can nonetheless leave a person emotionally and spiritually disfigured. And then there is fear, along with resentment, guilt, insecurity and anger; all of these are symptoms of a disease of the soul that is the antithesis of the healthy life that God wants for each of us.

Proverbs 2:2 paraphrased

It seems to me the biggest obstacle to a cure wasn't Naaman's disease. It was his sense of entitlement. First, Naaman brought an obscene amount of gold and silver with him thinking he could buy a cure. Then he was offended that the prophet Elisha didn't come out and perform a miracle for him. And when the messenger that Elisha sent to him showed up with instructions to in essence, go jump in Jordan River, Naaman left in a rage, commenting that an important man like himself should not have to suffer the indignity of washing in a foreign creek when the rivers of Damascus were obviously better suited for someone of his stature.

Only after his servants appealed to Naaman's sense of proportion did he finally bother to listen to common sense and follow Elisha's instructions. And when he did, that is when Naaman learned that God's love is not transactional. It is given and can only be received as a gift.

It turns out the most effective cures are often the simplest. If you want to be cured of what is eating at you, begin by setting aside the need to impress God and everyone else with how important, relevant and powerful you are. Anyone who wants to be truly healthy and experience the graced life, first has to turn away from the desire to earn favor, manipulate outcomes and exert control over other people. Instead of listening to the chatter of our own egos, we have to listen to the voice within that calls us to new life; a life marked by peace, understanding, and hope.

As Naaman learned, you cannot buy a cure for what ails you any more than you can buy God's love. It took him a while but to his credit, the Aramean Army commander finally came round to seeing what a powerless Jewish slave girl understood: that healing happens people show compassion.

Washing seven times in the Jordan River may have been the prescribed treatment for his disease, but it was the unmerited concern shown to Naaman by some unlikely agents of God's grace, agents like a foreign born slave girl and the servants who persuaded Naaman to swallow his pride, that finally opened his eyes and his heart to recognize that in the grander scheme of things, the most powerful people in the world are not the ones who wield authority over others but the ones who show compassion. And what is compassion but an expression of love?

