



DUSTY FEET AND CLEANSING WATER

July 7, 2019, Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

II Kings 5:1-17; Luke 10:1-11

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So, I think we can name the awkward reality that is before us. Last week the congregation voted to dissolve my call here at Brick Church and my last day is July 31st. Yet, here I stand, sermon in hand, having already been given this preaching date months ago. Indeed, after all that has transpired, it is a strange thing to lead worship and preach from this pulpit. But I have faith, and I hope you do too, that God is bigger than all of this. The Scriptures were read, there is water in the font, the table is prepared, and the Spirit will move. So let us pray...

*O LORD, Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts
be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.*

The Old Testament lesson that Dan read for us is a favorite of many, a really well told story actually. For those of you who don't know much about the prophet Elisha, he is the successor of Elijah, both of them prophets during the divided kingdom, and they reside in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. They are known for their fiery personalities and their miraculous acts, and this story today with Elisha records one of those fantastic miracles.

The passage from II Kings introduces us to General Naaman, a warrior mighty in valor, a great man from the kingdom of Aram, a nation who has just recently defeated Israel. But with all of his military might and power, Naaman is in trouble. Covered in scaly white sores, Naaman's body bears a leprous disease, and those struck with leprosy had to isolate themselves from all others. So when Naaman, the



most powerful general of one of the region's most powerful armies, is found to be leprous, it's a national emergency.

But unknown to Naaman, there is hope. Naaman doesn't know this, his king doesn't know this, and the Aramean elite—with all of their power and their might and their wealth—would have never guessed it. Instead Naaman's wife's slave-girl—an Israelite captured in the latest war—is the one who knows where to find hope. She knows that Naaman can be healed by the God of Israel, but more to the point by presenting himself to one of that God's prophets in Israel. And so surrounded by this powerful man and his powerful household, this young slave girl dares to speak up. She informs Naaman's wife that the Lord God is working through a prophet in the nation he's just defeated.

The story continues. In his desperation, Naaman speaks to his king, who sends a message to Israel's king—along with a bribe of gold, silver and clothes, as a reminder of his power—that he is to have Naaman healed. Notice this: the Aramean king doesn't even go to the prophet, he works within the power circles that he knows. Yet Israel's king knows better. He tears his clothes when he hears the news—he does not have the power to heal, and he thinks the Aramean king is trying to pick a fight with him.

But the prophet Elisha, who's not in the royal court, hears word that his king has torn his clothes in distress. So Elisha sends a message, telling his own king to calm down, that Naaman can come to him to be healed. And in *this* way all will know of the power of Israel's God, a power that here does not exist with the royalty or the military.

So this is where the story takes a funny turn, revealing just how proud Naaman is and how he must be humbled in order to be healed. Naaman still thinks that power and wealth and influence can win the day, and so he shows up at Elisha's door with his full entourage: horses, chariots, it sounds like he's brought half his army with him. And standing there in the countryside surrounded by the trappings of his power, Naaman is met only by one of Elisha's servants, just one servant with just one message: "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times." That's it. Go, wash, clean.



Naaman, mighty and strong, rich and famous, with his horses and his chariots, has just been told all it will take to cure him of his skin disease is to go and dip in a muddy river seven times. Naaman, the man who has traveled this far with a slew of servants, silver and gold, and ten sets of garments, has just been told that he will not be treated to some divine spectacle. Instead, his restoration must be brought about by one of the simplest of life's acts: bathing in the river. Naaman's healing cannot be bought with gold, it cannot be won with influence, it cannot be achieved through power and privilege.

So Naaman—used to the ways of the world—becomes angry and goes away, screaming about this absurdly simple solution. Can't you hear him? "Why did Elisha not appear to me? Why must I wash in some muddy foreign water when my own nation has its own beautiful flowing rivers? Where are the special powers, the impressive magic of this prophet? Don't I, general in the Aramean army, deserve better than this?"

Naaman throws a temper tantrum. You can imagine the soldiers under him agreeing that he deserved better. You can see the 'yes men' around Naaman standing there nodding their heads. However, in the midst of all that, it is once again servants who speak the plain truth. "We get it, Naaman, you came here looking for a spectacle. But all you have to do is wash and be clean. We'll even help you count seven times." Taking their advice, Naaman finally gives in. He finally sets aside his high expectations, and he washes in the Jordan seven times, and of course he's immediately healed. The text even says that his skin becomes like that of a young boy. Humbled and cleansed, Naaman has found healing with a prophet from Israel's God: the God of the conquered, the God of the lowly, the God of the servants who from start to finish have been able to see the truth through all of the pomp and circumstance. Because of all of this, in his humbled and healed state, Naaman expresses faith in the power of Israel's God, and he actually takes with him the very dirt from the ground to mark this holy moment. Naaman "returns home a different man, a clean man with loads of foreign dirt on which to worship Israel's God."¹

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4117



At first glance, this story seems to be about the well-known and named people: the warrior general Naaman, and the miracle-worker prophet Elisha, even the two kings who act as intermediaries. However, at second glance, the narrative actually unfolds because of the individuals on the fringe. The servants, not the main characters, are the ones through whom Naaman is eventually healed. Naaman's restoration is because of the bravery of a young slave girl, most likely a prisoner of war, who tells Naaman's wife about Elisha. Elisha's servant delivers the instructions for healing to Naaman. And when Naaman is offended by the lack of spectacle in Elisha's instructions, it is his unnamed servants that convince him to follow through with the simple plan. The powerful and wealthy may seem to move along a great deal of events in history, but this story reminds us that all that power and wealth blinds them—it can blind us—to the power of God at work in this world.

On my very first Sunday here at Brick Church in October of 2011, Michael Lindvall preached a stewardship sermon during Brick's typical stewardship season.² At the beginning he told a story of two small Methodist churches near their house in Michigan who had just hired a new minister. And this new minister, in her interview with the local paper, was astounded to find out that her new congregations, mostly lower income, were giving a tithe, 10 whole percent of their income, to support the church. They weren't making a lot these days, but their generosity was greater than any other church she'd seen. Connecting this story to Paul's words in II Corinthians 8 and 9 this is what Michael said in his sermon: "These two chapters [in Paul's letter] are nothing less than an ancient fund-raising appeal. Paul is collecting donations for the beleaguered church in Jerusalem ... These two chapters, this letter-in-a-letter, are a plea to the relatively prosperous Corinthians for them to do their financial part. Paul begins his appeal by noting that he's just come from "up north," from relatively poor Macedonia, where he'd made the same financial appeal. He opens his fund-raising letter to the *Corinthian* church by telling them how generously the poorer *Macedonian* churches have responded to the same appeal ... They gave quite 'voluntarily,' Paul notes,

² "STEWARDSHIP IN FOUNTAIN AND FREE SOIL" preached October 23, 2011, by Michael L. Lindvall, at The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, II Corinthians 8: 1-3, 7-11; 9: 6-8



‘according to their means, and even beyond their means.’” In other words, “Paul is unapologetically challenging the relatively prosperous, big-city Corinthian Christians to give like the relatively poorer Christians up north in Macedonia.” Michael then continues, “lower income Christians across the country, indeed poorer Christians around the globe, generally give a significantly higher percentage of their income to the mission of their churches than higher income churches do. This even though they can less easily afford it.”

Now, don’t misunderstand me, this is not a stewardship sermon I’m preaching. I quote from the first sermon I ever heard Michael preach simply to illustrate how power, wealth and privilege can blind us to just how active God is in the world and just how much we need to invest ourselves in God’s ministry. Naaman and his king expected their money, armies and abundance to bring about the general’s healing. And in fact, Naaman was offended when these instruments of power were disregarded. If it weren’t for the slave girl and the other servants, Naaman would have never known restoration. If Naaman hadn’t humbled himself to wash in the Jordan, he would have never known healing. For quite possibly the first time in his life, Naaman has to reckon with the fact that he is not in control, and the only people in the story who can reveal that to him are the servants: those around him who, because of their station, know that only God is in control. From start to finish, those with less power and fewer resources in the story have moved it along. Their eyes were not blinded by power, wealth and influence. They were open to what God was doing.

Power and wealth—and the...ultimately false...sense of security that they offer—can certainly blind us to God’s movement. This may be why Jesus gives those strange instructions to his disciples in the Luke passage Dan read. There is much ministry to be done, Jesus says, so go, but take nothing with you, rely on the hospitality of strangers, and shake the dust off when you aren’t received. In other words, Jesus doesn’t want his disciples to be blinded by their own possessions or influence. He doesn’t even want them to be burdened by pain when their ministry is rejected. “Leave the bag; leave the shoes; shake the dust. Travel solely with the power of God.”



And I believe that is the same message God has for each of us today. Set aside whatever trust we have in the ways of the world. Do not be blinded by whatever power and influence we think protect us. Shake the dust of pride off, release it, and be free to follow the guidance of the Spirit. Step into the waters and be cleansed from all that holds us back from following our Lord. And when our eyes are opened and our spirits renewed, we will see just powerful God is.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.