

Challenged Pre-Judgments
First Congregational United Church of Christ
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2 Kings 5:1-14

Then and now. As ever, Scripture invites us to listen in on events of the past and understand their significance to those who first heard them recited *and at the same time* listen to how the words are applicable to us today. The wonder and beauty of Scripture is that the events are both accounts of events in the lives of God's people in the past and speak in very real ways to persons of faith in the here and now. As we explore this mornings' reading from the fifth chapter of 2 Kings, I invite you to place yourself in the story. Whose behavior do you model? While this isn't a story about villainy, it is about pride and prejudice, expectations and hopes, illnesses of body and soul, healing and how much simpler redemption can be ours.

He was a proud man. He was, after all, a general – commander of the king's armies. He knew what was right, what was dutiful – and if he knew anything, he knew proper procedure, the ways things were done. Now he was angry – he was in a rage. His long trip had been in vain. He was a fool to think this idea would work. He was probably mad at himself for believing what was now a cockamamie if not ridiculous claim.

Oh, he was a fool all right. He was right on that count. Naaman, commander of the army of Syria, a kingdom just to the north of Israel that included the city of Damascus, was a fool. Oh, he was "bright," apparently a genuinely gifted military commander, devoted and loyal to his King (unlike generals then and now who overthrow the head of government), but on one of the most important days of his life, he was foolish – foolishness born of an innate ignorance and spiritual blindness *that so often bedevils us all*. Naaman had preconceived notions, pre-judgments, biases and set ideas that nearly proved disastrous.

The incredible irony is that Naaman rose to power and great influence despite others putting aside a well-established prejudice. Leprosy was seen as a social stigma if not a punishment from God, much as HIV/AIDS was viewed a couple of decades ago (and still is in some circles). One could argue that Naaman's leprosy was not severe or that most of the men in his army didn't know about it. A proper reading of the story belies that – as we will see.

In a raid by the Syrian army, a young girl from Israel was taken into captivity and became Naaman's wife's servant. She knew her mistress' husband, Naaman, had leprosy for it was she, the servant girl, who suggested Naaman go to Israel to be healed by Elisha. Naaman received permission from his king to go to Israel to be healed which means the king knew his top commander had leprosy. It is evident the servants and other personnel who accompanied Naaman on his trip south knew this was not a typical raid or invasion, that instead of a trip that meant coming back with stolen booty and more slaves, they were *taking* silver, gold and expensive clothing to give to some important person. There is proof throughout this brief passage that those who accompanied Naaman knew their master was seeking a healing from this dreaded disease.

So, even though a whole host of people of Syria managed to look beyond one of the most prevalent prejudices of the time – a prejudice that clearly existed seven hundred years later when Jesus, as recorded in our Gospel Lesson, broke with all social mores of his day and touched the man he healed of leprosy – despite a well established taboo on having anything to do with someone afflicted with leprosy, Naaman, willing to seek what in essence was to be a public disclosure of his illness – well, back to his foolishness – and, I repeat the end of an earlier sentence – foolishness born of an innate ignorance and spiritual blindness *that so often bedevils us all*.

This is a perfect case of the devil's presence in the details. Naaman got mad with what unfolded on three counts. First, Elisha sent a messenger with the instructions for Naaman's healing. Naaman may have been willing to submit to the will of his king, but he, a commander of armies, was to be healed by a *messenger*? Naaman wasn't important enough for Elisha to come out himself? Who the devil did this Elisha think Naaman was? To Naaman this was, to use an anachronism, a modern metaphor, "strike one." Then, not only did Naaman expect Elisha to meet him, he expected a dramatic gesture. Naaman wanted something right out of a televised dramatic throng-witnessed healing, a call about the mighty power of the LORD God, a waving of the hand over the leprosy – after all, this was a *big* deal, the commander of Aram's armies was about to be healed of a debilitating disease, drama please! This trip south with silver, gold and expensive clothing merited a big show. No Elisha (strike one) and now no big demonstration of a God's power (strike two). Strike three really was, to pull out all the metaphors possible here, strike three was the last straw, a tremendous blow to ego and Naaman's sense of pride. Naaman, told that the healing would come about if he were to wash in the Jordan River – dipping himself but seven times, was enraged. I think we can assume incredulosity at the start and facetiousness at the end of this quote:

Are not the rivers Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any waters of Israel?

In other words, you send some underling who does nothing dramatic and who tells me to go wash in some dinky, backwater, usually muddy thing you call a "river?"

I've seen the Jordan River. For most of its length, the stream that flows out of Galway Lake is bigger and more impressive. But, that is hardly the point! Naaman, stricken with leprosy, a disease that would continue to spread, a disease that often results in body parts literally falling off in decay, turned away in a rage. He was an important man who conceived incredibly detailed military strategies and here it was suggested that he undertake a simple, uncomplicated, less than fancy means to what was to be an important event in his life.

Fortunately, Naaman's foolishness was overcome by the heroic and brave actions of his servants. As those of us who gathered last Monday evening for the Adult Bible Class discussed, the servants in this story are the heroes. It was the servant girl in Aram who spoke to her mistress about a great prophet in Israel and it was Naaman's servants who had the courage to *instruct* their commander, to suggest to him that he rethink his response, reconsider his prejudice and, in essence, *humble* himself and acquiesce to the suggested prescription of healing. It is somewhat anti-climatic, but Naaman finally did as Elisha instructed and he was healed – just as, centuries later, the leper who approached Jesus was healed as well.

Oh how blind *we* are! Just think of how complicated we want to make things that are actually, granted, with some humility, pretty easy – or at least more simple than we first think!

In a world, where prejudices and bias seem to dictate the outcome of so much in human relationships, how simple it would be if everyone on this globe recognized the inherent value of everyone else, that all of us are created equal. Is that really that hard a concept to grasp? Does human pride, no human arrogance, ... or maybe it is the opposite, human fear and despair over where one fits into the grand scheme of things that compels one to put another person down in order to feel better about oneself – whatever the cause, just think about far a little humility on each of our parts would go ...

Just for a moment, let us grapple with the famous words in the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence, particularly as they stood in contrast to reality just after the Civil War, one hundred years after they were composed:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Frankly, the “created equal” part was anything but “self-evident” as in the middle of the nineteenth century “equality” did not include persons of color much less half the population, namely women. What should be a simple issue - human equality – has been anything but because of the blindness of those who allow their prejudice and bias block what is common sense – much like the common sense of Naaman’s servants who suggested that Naaman put aside his prejudice and follow through on the means to his healing.

As to equality for all people, we still have a long way to go – not only on rights for persons in the workplace so often treated as just another means of production – but on the simple recognition that what is good for one is good for all. Is it not shocking that legislation guaranteeing a woman’s right to seek redress for being treated lesser than a man in the workplace in terms of compensation and promotion was signed by President Barack Obama just last month?

There are the “simple” words “I’m sorry” that can go so far in restoring the balance in a friendship or other relationship. The need for humility in “I’m sorry” dictates, however, that it is clear one is sorry for what one has done. So often, the implication is “I’m sorry you took it that way” or “I’m sorry you reacted the way you did” or “I’m sorry you are mad at me” without actually apologizing for doing someone wrong.

The response to a genuine apology need not be complicated either. While forgiving does not necessarily mean forgetting, reconciliation means responding in kind and recognizing that as often as we need to forgive, we must also seek the forgiveness of others – a sentiment echoed in the words of the prayer Jesus teaches us to say to our God. Like any other habit, practice in the art of forgiveness and reconciliation is essential if not life-giving. The art of humility is not self-abasing so much as it is freeing!

Today’s lesson has so many applications. I was not sure to what issues to turn or not even sure that the issue today is not so much prejudice and bias as it may be numbness to the pain and hurt of others or being overwhelmed by so much despicable behavior as to shut our eyes and ears and other senses and just go about our lives hoping to shut out ... shut out information of

- genocide in the Darfur,
- civil wars in the Congo and Sri Lanka, Taliban resurgence in Pakistan, Afghanistan and all the other stans (the word stan means land) of that part of the world,
- of police brutality in all too many communities in this country,
- news just this last week of two judges in Pennsylvania who took millions of dollars in kickbacks from the juvenile detention centers to which they sent an unwarranted number of youth, many of whom committed very minor offenses,
- a company that *knowingly* sent salmonella-laced peanut products into the marketplace

Juxtaposed with that sad litany, we cite some simple acts by people that challenged pre-judgments and overcame incredible bias and ultimately demonstrated the wonder of God's gift of grace, a gift we would share with each other. There are heroes whose simple acts defied conventionality – from the servant - more a slave – the servant girl of Israel who spoke up to her mistress about a prophet in Israel, the servants who told Naaman to in essence set aside his pride and do as Elisha had instructed,

- Rosa Parks, weary from a day's work but perhaps more weary of being treated as a second class citizen who defied a social norm and gave all the more credence to the efforts of civil rights,
- Nelson Mandela who refused to allow decades of imprisonment in South Africa to embitter him who was able to rule a healing nation with calm and aplomb,
- Frederik Willem de Klerk, the white President of South Africa who shocked his nation by demanding whites surrender their exclusive hold on political and economic power, declaring the legalized prejudicial policy of apartheid, the policy of his government, to be immoral

So – what about us? That is the point, isn't it? Whose behavior do we model? What challenges do we hear in the words of Scripture? Hopefully, it is the good news, the good news that is ours of Christ, the Christ of all time and history Who transcends time and space to be present in the redemptive acts of Naaman's healing, the healing of a leper at the hands of Jesus of Nazareth, the presence of Christ is heroic acts throughout history and the Christ Whose Spirit moves in our midst today. The life-giving, prejudice-releasing, human customs-challenging message of Christ is ours to grasp if we would but face our pre-judgments, back away from notions born of self-serving human concepts, and allow God's grace to flow freely in our hearts and minds and souls.

The words of the first stanza of our next hymn [“Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life”] are apropos:

Where cross the crowded ways of life, where sound the cries of clan and race,
Above the noise of selfish strife, O Christ, we hear Your voice of grace.

May God's people say, “Amen.”

Amen.