

October 9, 2016
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Sermon – “Into the River”

Naaman, a man of power, wealth and prestige has leprosy.

He is angered by his disability and afraid of being outcast by society.

This situation, however, doesn't prevent him from having a certain sense of his own place that puts him above ordinary people.

He walks and talks with kings and heads an army and has the wherewithall to assemble a great treasure of reward for a cure he thinks he can buy.

Everything can be bought, Naaman believes, when you are on top of the world.

There are some things in life, however, that do not bend to power and prestige.

One of these is illness.

I have spent a lot of time in hospitals and at hospice bedsides.

When you are in hospice, or any hospital you are reminded of the egalitarian nature of disease.

In the context of a hospital there is no way to know who people are or how much money or power they have outside of the hospital.

Some have private rooms, or more flowers, but this is not always the case.

Power, prestige and wealth are simply stripped away in the face of death.

In the hospital there are no clothes or jewelry to show status and

no possessions to demonstrate wealth.

You are simply there, in a gown, in your bed.

All the gowns, all the rooms, all the beds are the same.

Perhaps this prepares us for the ultimate level playing field of standing before God after death.

In God's eyes, we are all the same, created equal, each one of us beloved.

God does not care who has more money, or what job you might have.

I doubt that God cares whether you have an advanced degree, a vacation home or a motor boat.

I believe that when we stand face to face with God he will want to know what we have done with the gifts and talents he gave us.

I envision a conversation.

"Tell me faithful servant, what did you do to show love?"

"To whom did you listen?"

"Who did you help?"

"Whose burden did you share?"

The movers and shakers in our story today, Naaman the great general, two kings, and one prophet, are all men with names.

They are important men in the eyes of the world and in their own eyes.

But the dramatic story of healing wouldn't happen if the "little people," the unnamed ones, didn't move things along.

Naaman's wealth and power turned out to be useless to him in his search for health.

The king of Israel is so self-focused that he perceives Naaman's plea for help as a trick to gain power.

When Naaman finally finds his way to Elisha he is outraged to be left standing outside, waiting.

He takes offense at not being received more respectfully by the prophet, and not provided with a more impressive, dramatic cure, something worthy of his status.

Fortunately, his servants have more sense of the possibility the moment holds, and these nameless people coax Naaman into forgetting his own importance and going for what will really matter, a cure.

Naaman, wouldn't even be standing before the king of Israel if an unnamed slave girl hadn't ventured to suggest that he consult "the prophet who is in Samaria."

This young girl is a captive, one of the countless victims of war between the powerful, and she must have some memory of what Elisha could do and what he represented.

It could not have been easy for her to voice her recommendation that Naaman seek out Elisha.

This unnamed slave girl represents for us people without power,

those whose voices are rarely heard.

She is one of those who work between the lines and behind the scenes.

I wonder if Naaman remembers to thank her when he returns

home.

One of the most interesting commentaries I read about the Naaman story reflected on the idea that Naaman's cleansing in the Jordan went beyond that of simply curing the leprosy.

Elisha's prescription for Naaman is that he wash seven times in the Jordan.

Seven is the biblical number that symbolizes completeness.

Naaman has the opportunity to rid himself of the armor that has shielded him from the rest of the world.

He is stripped of his pretension, his arrogance is washed away, his quest for power is cleansed from his soul, and his thirst for violence is left in the river.

He is made new.

Completely new.

He is given a second chance at life, something few people ever get.

In the verses that follow today's reading, Naaman returns to Elisha's home to offer thanks and praise to the God of Israel.

He says, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant."

Elisha refuses any gifts but Naaman will remain faithful to Yahweh forever.

The connecting link between the Old Testament and the gospel reading for this week is the healing of leprosy--for Naaman as well as the ten lepers in Luke's story.

Those healed are outside the community of faith.

Naaman was not a follower of Elisha, nor are the ten lepers followers of Jesus.

Naaman is a foreign general and an enemy of Israel, yet he seeks the help of Elisha and is healed.

Jesus heals ten lepers, and the only one who returns to thank him for it is a Samaritan – the enemy of Israel.

We are left with the clear message: Even those we call "enemies" get God's grace and healing attention.

These stories are meant to shock our sensibilities.

To remind us that God does not exist in our predetermined boxes. Our God is bigger than our own small prejudices of how we think God should work.

What boundaries do you imagine God to have?

Where have these been shattered?

Sometimes the transformation we need is from our own image of ourselves.

Sometimes what we need to be cleansed of or healed from is our own diseased thinking.

Often the demons that need to be rebuked are within us, created by us, nurtured by us.

If you had the opportunity to cleanse yourself in the Jordan River, what disease or malady would you want to rid yourself of?

If you were granted the power to restore, or transform some part of yourself, what would it be?

Would you change the way you think about other people?

Would you change the way you treat your family?

Would you want to emerge from the river as a person who others saw as a prophet?

The good news, my friends, is that God gives us the opportunity to transform our ordinary lives into lives of discipleship.

God is willing to grant us forgiveness for our past transgressions and forgiveness of sins.

We have the chance, today, and everyday to emerge ourselves into the cleansing waters of the Jordan River.

Think about it.

All you have to do is ask.

It doesn't take money, as Naaman learned.

It doesn't take prestige as the ten lepers learned.

All it takes is faith in a loving, merciful, forgiving God.

If you have that, you are invited into the river.

Plunge yourself into the river.

Cleanse yourself of any arrogance.

Free yourself from jealousy and greed.

Plunge yourself into the river.

Rid yourself of anger.

Rebuke the demons that plague you.

Plunge yourself into the river so that at the end of time when you stand before God he will be able to say,

“Well done humble servant.”