



"Washed by Grace"

a sermon by

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Our scripture lesson this Thanksgiving eve comes to us from the book of 2 Kings 5:1-16. “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. Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company he came and stood before him and said, “now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant.” But Elisha said, “As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!” Naaman urged him to accept, but Elisha refused.”

I suppose you could say that Naaman had a Napoleon complex. Perhaps it was his leprosy, that painful shortcoming of his flesh, that helped fuel him to claim so many military victories. Whatever it was, Naaman was a powerful man. A well decorated general, chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for Syria, an officer held in the highest regard by his king. So high, in fact, that the king would send a letter commending him to his would-be healer. Would-be, that is, were the king of Israel powerful enough to heal a sick man. So Naaman loaded himself down with gifts and horses and chariots and the equivalent of about a million US dollars to travel over a hundred miles to see the king of Israel in hopes of a blessing. In hopes that his affluence and influence and references and intimidation would buy him healing. I say intimidation because he had led battles against Israel’s army. Had been a victor over their people, enjoying such spoils of war as the young Israelite girl who now played servant to his wife, who cued him in to the fact that somewhere out there there was a man who could heal him. So it is really difficult to capture the depth of insult he was now dealing to the Israelite king- arriving with all of his wealth offering to purchase something that the king could never possibly give. The characters to this point are thrown into turmoil until Elisha hears word of Naaman’s presence and sends for him, that he might know what it means that there is a prophet in Israel.

So imagine the Rolls Royce and the government motorcade streaming Syrian flags, the Armored Truck from the World Bank, and an entourage from Saks Fifth Avenue all pulling onto the quiet suburban street in front of Elisha's house. All the media has gathered not to mention the neighbors, surely this would impress him, but instead of being met by the great prophet for whom they had traveled so far to meet, out from the home comes a young kid with a post-it note, telling him to go take a bath. This is more than Naaman's enormous ego can handle. Such an ordinary request is hardly befitting for a man of his stature. The charge to embark on some great adventure for him to prove his valor and be rewarded with healing would have been more like it, or a spectacular public display of God's power was more along the lines of what he had in mind—something like the prophet's mentor Elijah had done when he called down a fire from heaven to consume an offering to dazzle the pagan priests. "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!" It is amazing that the power of his wounded pride and arrogance was going to cause him to turn his back on the healing being offered to him, the healing he desired just not on his terms, but his servants bring him to his senses. And his injured pride is overcome by his desire to be made whole.¹ He submits himself to the simple bath of grace, and not only his body but his spirit is restored. His eyes were opened, and he recognized that a great work of power had been effected in his life to change it forever, a power from the hand of the God of Israel who would not work according to his ideas, and was not interested in his payment, but who wanted only him. "Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company he came and stood before him and said, "now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel." And with that he commits his life to God in a spontaneous and irresistible response of gratitude and faith from which commitment simply cannot help but flow.

Deep in the Congo there is a Presbyterian medical missionary couple who are working on building up the community in the midst of nearly impossible odds. In a land torn apart by tribal warfare, the weapons of rape, malnourishment, and disease are all aimed at the souls of the people. This couple, each physicians, works most closely with the women of the community, many of whom are shunned because of complications from childbirth that pollute their bodies and render them offensive to their fellow villagers. In a wild land one of the greatest risks to their children come from bacteria that is, in the western world, some of the most easy to prevent. Basic practices of hand washing in the west destroy bacteria that run rampant in these rural villages causing diarrhea and vomiting in children whose frail bodies have no reserves to spare, leading to grave illness and frequently to death. Each day the missionaries serve a meal that all of the women of the village enjoy, and recently at the meal they tried to educate the women on the importance of the simple practice of washing their hands before eating in order to prevent disease. Day after day they spoke of the positive effects that this practice could have, and promised that it would help cure those illnesses that threatened their children the most. The women simply did not believe them. They lamented that their children threw up constantly, their bodies expelling needed water, there was nothing that could spare them as it seemed every child caught this illness that weakened their bodies so. The women begrudged the missionaries for trying to tell them to do something new- they had gotten along just fine without washing hands, why should they begin

¹Peter Hawkins, "Naaman's No-Nonsense Cure" in *The Christian Century*, June 20-27, 2001, p. 12, copyright by The Christian Century Foundation

now? What good could it possibly do? Finally, the missionaries devised a plan. They instituted a new rule that before grace was spoken before each meal, hands had to be washed. The women grumbled but were indifferent- eager only to do what was necessary to eat. After three weeks, at one meal after all the women had been seated, the missionaries called for everyone's attention and asked for a show of hands. Who among them, in the past three weeks, had a child who had become ill? They said the room became absolutely silent as each woman looked around, and saw that not a single hand went into the air. Their eyes widened and suddenly the entire community gathered leapt to its feet and burst into tears and song, creating on the spot an anthem of praise, 'we thank you God for the gift of water to wash our hands and save our children!', and vowing to tell each woman in every village to wash their hands so that their children could be spared too, and so that they could know the wonderful gifts of our God.²

James 4:10 says, "humble thyself in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up." We can get so caught up in our pride and our arrogance that we actually start to believe that we know how to secure for ourselves the most essential things that we need for life. We believe that we can purchase healing power, network our way to the one who can bring wholeness, and direct how the Lord should provide. We can get so set in our ways and certain that our fate is sealed that we close off the possibilities of life under God. And forget to consult the deep wisdom of the community of faith that surrounds us. Thanksgiving for the Christian believer is the simple acknowledgment that we cannot do for ourselves, but that it is only God who provides for us. Who is eager to give us good gifts even when we turn our back and walk away. Who calls us to simply admit our need, turn toward him, be obedient to his call, offer our thanks in grateful response for the grace we have been given, and to share the good news of his power with others so that they too can be saved. In this season we are asked to recall what it means to be washed by grace, restored and renewed to new life by a God who heals us and cleanses us from all our sin, and who remains the giver of every good and perfect gift that we could never accomplish for ourselves. Who surprises us in his provision and turns our hearts to recognition of him and to faith. In Hebrew the word for blessing comes from the word birkeim, which is the word for knees, because the bending of one's knees is the universal expression of humility. And true gratitude first takes true humility. There is an ancient Jewish prayer, perhaps as old as the story of Naaman itself that was told about 2800 years ago, that goes, barucha ta shem elokeynu melo aloham.³ Praise to you Lord our God, ruler of the universe, for keeping us in life, for sustaining us, and for helping us to reach this moment. May we be given the wisdom to know all life as a gift from God, and the humility that makes true gratitude possible. That we may hit our knees in thanksgiving and live our lives in praise. Amen.

²Michael and Nancy Haninger serve in the Congo. Information on their ministry can be found at www.pcusa.org/missionconnections.

³ Michael Siegal on Gratitude at www.30goodminutes.org/reflections. Hebrew transliterated.