

"Naaman- God's Fool"

2 Kings 5:1-19

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There is much about this story of Naaman which I find quite surprising. Let's begin with Naaman himself- a general, a mighty man of war, a man of violence and blood. Why should our God—a God of PEACE AND LOVE--show compassion to someone whose hands are stained with so much violence and blood, to one who was a COMPLETE STRANGER to peace and compassion. Also, Naaman is a powerful figure. He's the king's Premier, his confidant, and if we believe Christ and the Prophets, God BRINGS DOWN the mighty and reserves his love for the humble, the poor, and the weak. Why should our God who consistently sided with the powerless extend grace to such a proud and mighty individual as THIS?

What's MORE, Naaman is not even a JEW- he's a SYRIAN. This doesn't just mean that he was a foreigner, those with whom the Jews were forbidden to even have contact with- Naaman is a member of a nation which had invaded Israel in the past and was now poised to invade her AGAIN. Why should our God who called ISRAEL ALONE his People show love to Israel's hated enemy? There was no more reason for God to love Naaman--a man of violence and blood, a man of great power and authority, a man who was an enemy to God's chosen people--than for God to love either YOU OR ME!

And yet DESPITE his great position and powerful might, Naaman was afflicted with what was then the greatest scourge in the ancient world- leprosy. Where today's modern medicine has brought this disease under control, back THEN, it was the most fearful, most hated condition known to man. It was an incurable disease, SO loathsome it was regarded as a judgment or curse by God upon that person. If a Jew became a leper, he or she was declared unclean by the priest and immediately banished from society. He had to wear certain clothing indicating his affliction and announce his uncleanness whenever someone approached. Society's harshest judgment befell the leper for it meant a life of ABSOLUTE REJECTION, ALIENATION AND LONELINESS, the CRUELEST FATE OF ALL. How ironic that such a mighty man, at the very height of his powers and influence, should fall so far, so fast; how in an instant he should be stripped so completely of his position, his power, and even his dignity as a human being.

Well, skipping much of the details of this story, we see how God uses a young Jewish girl—one who had become a slave in Naaman's household in Damascus--to help bring about his healing. This girl is nothing more than a poor, powerless, and unimportant person- the very OPPOSITE of Naaman, and yet SHE is the first instrument God uses to teach this great leader the lesson of humility. Here she serves as a slave to one who is a great ENEMY of her people and she doesn't desire revenge upon him; she doesn't wish to see him accursed and suffering. Rather, she wishes he could meet the prophet Elisha whom she is confident would cure him. She desires nothing less than to see him recover his health and become whole once again even though it might mean that one day he could possibly lead an army to overwhelm Israel and make MORE slaves of her people. But she's not concerned about that. Instead she feels the deep pain of her master and desires to alleviate it. Such a demonstration of compassion is really quite extraordinary!

As I prepared this sermon, I thought back to a young man who more than three decades ago was instrumental in transforming public opinion about what would become a world-wide scourge. Many of you may remember the name “Ryan White.” He was the courageous American teenager who taught us so much about patience and tolerance in the face of great aversion and irrational fear. Having been born a hemophiliac, his blood did not clot like normal human beings. At the age of thirteen, he contracted AIDS through a transfusion and was initially given six months to live. After overcoming his first serious bout of the disease, he wanted to return to school but the Superintendent refused to let him, forcing him to listen to his 7<sup>th</sup> grade classes via telephone instead. The fear over AIDS was such that many school officials, teachers, parents, and his fellow students erroneously believed that they could contract the disease by merely coming into casual contact with him. Hence, they refused to shake his hand or let him use the public restrooms. It was even believed they could become infected by HIV themselves through contact with the newspapers he delivered each day.

Ryan’s mother went to court to get him reinstated in his classes and eventually won. Still, when he WAS permitted to return to school, 151 out of 360 students stayed home. A group of families withdrew their children and started an alternative school. Among those who remained, he was cruelly taunted and even shunned by many of his classmates. The school required him to eat with disposable utensils, use separate bathrooms, and waived his requirement to enroll in a gym class. But the harassment and discrimination didn’t end THERE. Vandals broke the windows of his home, cashiers refused to touch even his mother’s hands when making change at the supermarket, persons would purposely cross the street to avoid him if they saw him coming. And so this quiet and humble young man had become a local pariah, A MODERN-DAY LEPER in the eyes of his neighbors and community. Eventually, he and his mother were forced to move to another city.

But as we have often seen, God is able to bring something redemptive out of the most tragic of situations. Publicity about his story catapulted him into the national spotlight. While isolated in middle school, he appeared frequently on national television and in newspapers to discuss his battle with the disease. He valiantly fought against bigots (which included many Christians) who saw AIDS as some kind of retribution against gay men and intravenous drug users- the two largest groups stricken by the disease at the time. AIDS, he declared, was an infectious disease that ANY human being could catch who was unfortunate enough to contract it. Eventually, he became a poster child for the AIDS crisis, appearing in numerous fundraising and educational campaigns about it. Many celebrities and political leaders embraced him, including Elton John, Michael Jackson, and Ronald and Nancy Reagan. A movie was made about his life- “The Ryan White Story” which was aired nationally in 1989. Through it all, Ryan White remained a model of dignity and grace, serving as an eloquent spokesman about AIDS to his classmates, journalists, and the rest of the American public. Yet, Ryan would say he’d trade all his fame for a clean bill of health, that his greatest desire was “to be a regular kid.” However, by 1990, his health had deteriorated further and within a month of graduating high school, he passed away. Over 1,500 persons filled the pews of the 2nd Presbyterian Church in downtown Indianapolis to honor him and his short life.

In response to the awareness he created, President George H.W. Bush signed a bipartisan bill into law that was called The Ryan White CARE Act. This legislation provided more than

two billion dollars to help cities, states, and community-based organizations to develop and maintain coordinated and comprehensive systems of diagnosis, care and treatment, especially for the POOREST Americans contending against the disease. In the five years he struggled with the disease, his courage and modesty and forgiveness to those who had initially rejected him touched hearts all over the world, and he did MORE to break down the walls of fear and misunderstanding we have of AIDS than any one person. Yes, God is STILL using the poor, simple, powerless, unimportant people of the world to move great mountains and accomplish his will!

But back to Naaman- this important and powerful general has become so desperate that he's even willing to visit this Jewish prophet in the hope that he can do what his own countrymen could NOT. Wanting to overwhelm the prophet with his great authority, he loads his horses and chariots and, like a presidential motorcade, pulls up to the front door of Elisha's house; he thinks all he has to do is bark the command to Elisha and the prophet will heal him. He knocks on the door and waits, and waits, and waits some more, until the door slowly opens and IT ISN'T EVEN ELISHA, but one of his MESSENGERS. This is the SUPREME insult for this great general isn't even received but has to talk to the prophet through this intermediary. Naaman has to be steaming, but because this man represents his last hope, he will set aside his pride, at least for the moment, and hear him.

The message delivered from Elisha is short and simple- "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored to you and you shall be clean." Well if Naaman felt embarrassed receiving advice from his young servant girl, and then has to journey all the way to Samaria to speak to this Jewish prophet, and when he arrives, he isn't even received by the prophet but by one of his servants, when he is instructed to wash seven times in the Jordan River for his healing, he actually becomes furious! He says, "O.K. That's it. Enough is enough. How could I have been so naïve and so gullible to come all the way down here and expect some supposed Jewish prophet, who I can't even meet, would heal me. Now they want to FURTHER embarrass me by having me wash seven times in their filthy creek when the rivers of Damascus are far better than all the waters in Israel. I could just as easily wash seven times in my own tub as I could wash in the Jordan. Do they take me for a FOOL!"

Now let me remind you that this man is no simpleton, certainly not the kind to suffer fools gladly. He is a wise and intelligent leader. He is courageous on the battlefield and his successes there have contributed to the high esteem he enjoys from his people and his king; he has great reason to feel proud with all he has accomplished. BUT NOW, all that esteem, all those accomplishments, the rest of his entire future, are on the verge of being erased. When those first few signs of leprosy appeared, he knew his life--for all intents and purposes--was over, that there was nothing left to live for. There would be no more battles to fight, no more regiments to command, no more conferences with his king. But then a simple slave girl opens her mouth and he sees hope RESTORED once again. That hope may be thin; it may just be a shot in the dark, but it's all he has. This prophet remains his last hope, and so he endures the humiliation and the blows to his pride because he knows the alternative to it is hopelessness and despair.

I can certainly sympathize for the man because there was a time when I ALSO lived without hope, a period in my life when I was a Naaman and perhaps YOU were one TOO. Fifty years ago this summer, while preparing to enter college as a freshman, I can still remember MY incredible pride, MY amazing arrogance at thinking how I was mankind's great gift to higher

education. I remember how enlightened I felt I was, immersing myself in the great philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche who wrote "God is dead." I was absolutely certain there was no God, that life was reduced to the survival of the fittest where only the strong and intelligent would survive and I was bound and determined to be among them- intelligence and ambition were all one needed to succeed in life.

At the same time I was attending this large liberal eastern university, my twin brother was attending a small Bible college in eastern Pennsylvania. During holidays, we would get together and compare notes. I would tell him all about my exploits at fraternity house parties and my involvement in radical student movements. Then I asked him what HE did and he recounted how he was teaching a Sunday School class full of mentally-challenged children, putting in some time at the local food pantry, and how he would go out on weekends to share Jesus in the local communities. I remember how upset I would get with him for wasting his time spreading this religious mythology. But he would patiently smile and say, "David, someday you'll understand," making me, of course, all the madder. I remember thinking to myself, "Howard, you're an idiot. My twin brother is nothing but a DAMNED FOOL!"

Now stop for a second and think of what I was saying to my brother. I told him to his face that he was a halfwit for the things he believed in. And WHY? Over the past twenty years, the world has entered a new millennium, the 21<sup>st</sup> century- an age dominated by hard science and cool reason. It has been science and reason and all the accompanying advancements in technology that has enabled us to create the kind of progress we have and enjoy- from computers and jets that fly the speed of sound to hydrogen bombs and sending groups of civilians into space as we've all witnessed over the past couple of weeks. Yet, my twin brother continued to insist there is an intelligent Being who moves throughout this world, whom he contends cares for us as a Father cares for his own children. He believed that this Being sent his only-begotten Son into our world to reveal his love for us and save us from ourselves. What's more, he claimed that this Son was born of a young girl in a small barn reserved for animals, that that frail, vulnerable piece of humanity lying there helpless in a manger whom the world stops and observes every Christmas, was nothing less than GOD HIMSELF entering our world. Who can BELIEVE such nonsense, such claptrap as that; common sense tells us it's all PURE PAP. You see, gods are not born into the world and they certainly don't come to us frail and helpless and vulnerable!

And Howard was convinced that that child grew and developed sympathies ESPECIALLY for people who were weak and hurting and neglected, for those reduced to living on the fringes of society, that this God/man—Jesus Christ--performed many marvelous works and healings out of compassion for such persons. It was said he exposed the hypocrisy and spiritual bankruptcy of the religion of that day, and he provoked the priests and governors over the region to the point they had him arrested and sentenced to death. And then came the ULTIMATE lunacy when my brother said that this God/man intentionally allowed himself to die between two criminals in order to demonstrate to the rest of his creation just how much he loved them. I thought to myself that a GREATER FABLE was never devised by man, that it was all COMPLETE AND UTTER NONSENSE! Everyone knows you can't kill God- gods kill US!

But WAIT- there's MORE! Howard FURTHER asserted that three days later, this figure rose from the dead and appeared to his disciples to assure them that if THEY believed in and

followed him, THEY would arise from the dead TOO just as HE did. How could any brother of mine swallow such rot as THIS! How could he abdicate all reason and common sense in favor of such a weird and fantastic tale which children might still believe but certainly any ENLIGHTENED person would instantly dismiss?

Well as my brother correctly predicted, one day I WOULD understand- and PRAISE GOD THAT I DID! Like Naaman, I TOO suffered from a dangerous form of leprosy which the Bible calls unbridled pride and boundless ambition; like that Syrian general, I ALSO was a walking corpse without hope in this world. But ALSO like Naaman, I TOO had to humble myself and say, "God, if there IS a God, help me. I have tried to live according to my own understanding and my life is a complete mess. Please Lord, YOU help put the pieces together for me!" Believe me, it didn't take me long to realize how everything I had dismissed as pure foolishness was in fact THE POWER OF GOD UNTO SALVATION FOR MY LIFE. I discovered how God has chosen the FOOLISH things of the world to shame the wise, and how God has chosen the WEAK things of the world to shame the strong, and the DESPISED things of the world, God has chosen, in order to shame what the world calls respectable- that no one should ever boast before God. I, TOO, had become a fool, just like Howard- what the Apostle Paul called "a fool for Christ."

Friends, the wise men followed a star until they found that child, and became fools by worshiping that babe. The disciples dropped their nets and left their families and hometowns in order to follow and die for that man- they TOO became fools. A Roman guard watched him die, naked and forsaken on that cross and declared "Truly, this was the Son of God"- one MORE fool to add to the mix. And a brilliant young man named Saul, abandoned a promising career as a lawyer to become a FOOL- to undertake a new life as a wandering preacher and teacher that would get him stoned and imprisoned and eventually put to death.

This morning, I stand before you performing what the Apostle Paul called "the foolishness of preaching." And afterwards, I will approach this baptismal font, dip my hand into a water basin, and then place my wet hand upon the head of a beautiful child. Through this foolish act, we, as "fools for Christ," believe that the ULTIMATE spiritual event will occur- that Reese Dolby--the infant daughter of Chad and Breanne Dolby--will become part of the kingdom of God, a member of the universal body of Christ. To the intelligent, perceptive mind, to the enlightened wisdom of this age, it will appear as sheer stupidity- she will simply get her head WET and nothing more. But TO THE NAAMANS of this world, TO THOSE LIKE US who have known the bankruptcy of such wisdom, we who were once walking death without any hope in this world- it is SURELY THE POWER OF GOD UNTO THE SALVATION OF OUR SOULS. That child does not have to wash herself seven times in the Jordan to find her healing- her parents Chad and Breanne, by raising her in a devout and loving home and in the presence of YOU, the extended members of her Christian family, will help to accomplish THAT. Surrounded by such faith and love, that seed of faith planted by God deep within her being will begin to take root and grow such that as time goes on, her life will resemble more and more the mind and heart of the very one who knows and loves her BEST- JESUS CHRIST. In time, she, like Naaman and like the rest of us, will demonstrate what a life that is TRULY healed and TRULY cleansed looks like when she takes her place among us as yet ANOTHER "fool for Christ." And so my fellow fools, let us now prepare to receive her as one of CHRIST'S OWN in this marvelous household of faith we call his "Church."