

Strangers at Home¹

2 Kings 5:1-19

February 12, 2012

For the past week, I have been away in Montreat, NC with 17 fellow pastors at what we have dubbed “Preacher Camp.” Our ‘goal as a group is to help one another study and prepare sermons for the upcoming year – but I always leave this time with my preacher friends profoundly grateful for the gift of Scripture...these stories, in which we find our story for how to live as God’s chosen people.

This morning, our scripture is from 2 Kings. It is one of those stories that I love. This morning, we hear about an exchange between Naaman and Elisha. There are a few things to know before hearing this scripture. The first is that Naaman is from Aram – or, present day Syria. Unlike today, when Syria is making headlines because they cowardly use violence to hold onto a power that is shrinking, in the time of Elisha and Naaman, Syria was the big kid on the block. They had already handed Israel a major defeat. Naaman was the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for the wealthy, powerful, empire of the day. That he would stoop and go to Israel – a sworn enemy who he had already trampled under foot – to seek healing tells us something about how desperate Naaman was. Listen with me for God’s word...

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

¹ This sermon, and its title, are with thanks to the Rev. Dr. Pete Peery – whose fine work helped me during a week in which I had little time!

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 he said, ‘As the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!’ He urged him to accept, but he refused. Then Naaman said, ‘If not, please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt-offering or sacrifice to any god except the LORD. But may the LORD pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the LORD pardon your servant on this one count.’ He said to him, ‘Go in peace.’

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Flannery O’Connor said: “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd.”

At first blush, this story about Naaman and Elisha seems to be about healing. But look closer. What Naaman discovers in the search for that healing is the truth about the grace of God.

“Now I know...” he says. “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel...”

Naaman left his home in search of healing. At the end of the story, Naaman returns to the same home he left – but with different knowledge. It is a knowledge that makes him odd.

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It’s actually kind of amazing that Naaman made it to Israel in the first place. He had *leprosy* – that word had the power that cancer has today. A mild case - Naaman could still function within his role as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs – but one that required immediate attention.

After seeking medical advice, getting a second opinion, and making a special trip to the Mayo Clinic, Naaman was out of options. What was left for him was to take the advice of one of his slaves – an Israelite girl that served in his house, one of the many spoils of victory for one of his many military triumphs.

This slave girl was a *nobody*. But, as often happens, when you are pressed up against a wall, your pride is one of the first things you relinquish.

Naaman arrived in Israel with a letter – a demand, really – for the King whose army Naaman had just crushed. The King of Israel had no help to give. Then the prophet Elisha – a man with no political power – interceded. He sent word for Naaman to come by his house to receive healing. Naaman, being the first-world, powerful person that he is – shows up at Elisha’s door with silver, and gold, and fine linens...he show up with horses and chariots and an army of men...he shows up *entitled* to a healing – and what he gets is a message: go wash in the Jordan River. Seven times.

He doesn’t even get the message from the prophet himself, but from one of Elisha’s messengers.

For Naaman to be told to wash in the Jordan River is kind of like telling him to go sit in a storm sewer. There were beautiful rivers in Syria; in Damascus where the water was clear and crisp and clean. The Jordan River was a muddy mess – and it was filled with the riff-raff of Israel. If what Naaman needed was a bath, surely he could go to some high-end spa...but

to wade down into the banks of the Jordan to wash with the people who don't matter? That was too much for Naaman to handle.

Yet –again, and amazingly – Naaman *paused and listened* –
listened again to *ones he would not normally listen to*—
this time to his own servants.

Trusting their word he layed aside *his own power, wealth and position*.
He went down into the waters of the Jordan –
along with the rest of God's vulnerable people.
And he is made clean – *whole*.

Notice the change in the word. Naaman set out to gain a cure.
He ended up being made *clean – restored – whole*.
He ended up being made into the person he was created to be.

“*Now I know . . .*,” Naaman said to Elisha.

“Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel.”

“Now I know my power, my position, my wealth, –
the might of my nation, the gods my nations trusts
are not gods. They do not deliver.”

“Now I know”

Naaman's leprosy was gone.

But so was his bad theology – the trusting of gods that are false gods,
the trusting of his own power. Naaman now knew grace – the
freely given grace of God.

And after he was healed, Naaman returned to his home.

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You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd.

Have you ever been encountered with the truth – the truth of God's radical
cleansing grace – encountered in such a way that you became odd when you
returned home?

My grandmother was born in 1909 in the Kiangu Su province in northern
China. She was the daughter of two Presbyterian missionaries. For the first
18 years of her life, while Grandmom spent her life away from home in the
South, she was healed in ways beyond her imagining.

Growing up in China among people so different than those at home
she came to know the truth of the Sovereign One
encountered in Jesus the Christ, —
the God *who loves and claims all people* as God's own people.
It made her odd.

During the Depression she spent much time
working in the East Harlem Protestant Parish of New York City
among all sorts of God's people —
black, brown, Puerto Rican, all poor, all on the margins.

Then she came home to the South, to Virginia, —
to the Southern Presbyterian Church again and began teaching.

She married — a man from a family totally at ease
with the segregated system of Virginia.

Indeed, her father-in-law (my great-grandfather) was a politician
who was a part of the "Byrd Machine" —
that political organization committed to maintaining
segregation.

But now, *how was she to serve this God* she had come to know *at home*?
Was she to directly take on the politicians allied with her father-in-law?
Was she to counter every racist comment her mother-in-law made?
Was she to avoid dining with her in-laws
and enjoying their heartfelt hospitality
knowing it was provided and sustained
by a system that demeaned the kind of people that God
loved?

She had been encountered by the truth and the truth *made her odd* —
and a stranger at home.

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It is hard to be a stranger at home!

Sensing this, Naaman asked Elisha for two things.
First, he asked for *two mule loads of dirt*, — Israelite dirt.

Back at home, Naaman knew he would *need a place to stand apart*
from the ideologies and gods of his home culture.

He knew he would need a place to stand and be encountered afresh
by the reality of the kingdom of the One True God.

But then he made another request, a stunning bold request.

He asked for pardon. Pardon, or, grace, for times when he knew he would acquiesce

and indeed bow down to the gods of the his home culture
rather than worshipping the Sovereign God, —
the Holy One of Israel, alone.

Naaman wonders, —

“When the king leans on my arm and asks me to take him to the Temple of Rimmon, the god of Syria, what am I to do? Am I to drop the king off at the door and let him hobble in on his own? Am I to accompany him? To do so without causing a scene —will require me to bow with the rest of the crowd.”

“Please, may the LORD *pardon me* on this account,” Naaman asks.

Elisha, the servant of God, knows the scriptures: —

*“The LORD is our God, the LORD **alone!**”*²

Elisha, the mouthpiece of this jealous, sovereign God *knows* the command:

*“you shall have no other gods before me!”*³

Yet, what does Elisha do?

This agent of God gives the dirt and grants the pardon!

“Go in peace!” he declares.

Dirt given. Dirt sprinkled beneath our shoes giving us a place to stand
as we navigate living at home among all the gods of our home culture.

Pardon granted for those moments when we find

that navigation terribly awkward or even impossible to do.

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Naaman is given two gifts as he heads for home: two mule loads of dirt and the gift of pardon for those times that he will cave into the pressure to worship the gods who are not the One True God.

Those gifts are still given to you and to me, —

ones transformed by God’s redeeming grace, —
who find it hard to be *odd* at home.

² Deuteronomy 6:4

³ Exodus 20:3

That pile of dirt.

Is it this congregation?

Is it the ash-Wednesday ash that we will soon spread on our foreheads?

Is it the invisible but important mark that remains from our baptism?

That pile of dirt is sprinkled beneath your shoes, —

giving you a place to stand to remember who alone is sovereign and who alone gives life.

And, yes, as citizens of God's kingdom, you and I strive to serve God alone here at home

amidst all the complexities of this culture, —
a culture we so love

and yet a culture that so desperately clings to gods that do not save.

As we do so, we will likely find ourselves at times

awkwardly caving to the pressures of the culture.

As that happens, remember: —

surprising *grace has been given*, given now, to you, to me.

God's grace and truth has made us odd, sisters and brothers.

Like Naaman, now made whole, —

we are and will remain *strangers here at home*.

Just remember as we experience being so strange, —

there is holy dirt beneath our shoes.

And a word of blessing as we find our way: "*Go in peace.*"