

Even to the Foreigner
2 Kings 5:1-15a
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Matthew 5:43-48

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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All Saints Sunday

2 Kings 5:1-15a

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favour 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.'

Matthew 8:2-3

...there was a leper who came to [Jesus] and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.' He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, 'I do choose. Be made clean!' Immediately his leprosy was cleansed.

Matthew 5:43-48

'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your

brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.’

The last two weeks we have talked about Kings David and Solomon as bad examples. Examples of kings who broke God’s laws and violated the covenant that God made with God’s people. The fact that God kept God’s promises to them and to God’s people after David and Solomon did what they did is proof of God’s amazing love.

This week we’ve skipped ahead a hundred years. After Solomon’s death, his kingdom was split up. The prophet Elisha lives in the smaller northern kingdom of Isreal, the one that has just two of the twelve tribes.

Today is All Saints Sunday. Today I’d like to talk about a good example. Someone who lived out God’s covenant in the world and showed the world what a saint looks like.

“Saint” is one of those words that different people understand differently. The word came into English from the Latin word *sanctus*, which means “holy.” A saint is literally a holy person. A person who is associated with God.

Our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters have a different understanding of the word, and, therefore, they have a rigidly defined process for determining whether someone is a saint. For example, Pope Francis recently declared Archbishop Oscar Romero, of El Salvador, to be a saint. Romero was murdered in 1980 for speaking out against military oppression.

But the word means “holy person.” Not a superhero. An ordinary person who is living in God’s covenant. There are a lot more saints in the world than the Vatican has ever recognized.

In our story this morning, Naaman is a great general for the king of Aram, or Syria.

The Arameans, or Syrians, have raided Israel and taken captives back as slaves. This is how war worked in this time. In one of these raids they captured a girl, and she became a slave belonging to Naaman's wife. We don't know this girl's name. All we know about her is that she is young, small, and unimportant.¹

Naaman has leprosy, a contagious disease that causes skin sores and nerve damage. It means that he cannot live with his family. Leprosy can be lethal for children, and even for adults there was no cure until long-term antibiotic treatment was developed.

This slave girl says to her mistress, "There is a prophet in Samaria who could cure Naaman of his leprosy."

Her mistress speaks with her husband, her husband speaks with the king of Aram, and the next thing you know, Naaman is on his way to Samaria.

Naaman shows up in Samaria with quite an entourage. Horses and chariots and soldiers. This is partially to show how important Naaman is, and partly to transport and protect what Naaman brings with him. Naaman brings an astounding amount of money. In today's money, about a hundred fifty-seven thousand dollars in silver and two point seven million dollars in gold. Plus ten sets of presumably really expensive clothes. He wants to be healed, now, and he's prepared to pay for it.

Apparently, the slave girl is either ignored or left behind in Syria, because Naaman does not go straight to the prophet. Naaman is sure he knows how things are done. He has a letter from his king, and he goes to the king. After all, the king can just command this prophet to do whatever the king says, right?

¹ All meanings of the Hebrew word נַעֲמָן (2Ki 5:2 WTT). This description is why I'm calling her a girl rather than a woman – she certainly seems to have been seen as a girl by those around her.

The king of Israel is not a good example here. He is afraid. He reads this letter and he immediately sees a nefarious plot. He knows that he has no power to cure leprosy. He doesn't seem to think about Elisha. He assumes that the Syrian king's intention is to claim that he refused to heal Naaman, and use that as an excuse to start a war. A war that Syria would win, and Israel would lose. The king freaks out like Daffy Duck, tearing his clothes and ranting.

Elisha, though, is cool. Elisha does not even leave his house. He sends a message to the king, saying, "Send this foreign general to me." So Naaman and his entourage troop over to Elisha's house. They stop outside, and Elisha sends a servant to tell him, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and you'll be cured."

Naaman does not take this well. He gets angry and storms off. Naaman does not want to listen and follow instructions like an ordinary person. He wants to be treated like a celebrity.

He looks at the Jordan River, which is closer to what we would call a healthy creek than a big river. He compares this creek with the great rivers of Damascus back home. He is not impressed.

Then his slaves come to him and ask, "If the prophet had told you to do something difficult, wouldn't you have done it?" If Elisha had told him to make a pilgrimage, he would have gone. If Elisha had told him to kill a monster, or run a marathon, Naaman would have done it without a second thought. Then the story would have been about his deeds, his courage, his prowess.

But that's not how God works. No, the way God works is that even the mighty Naaman has to listen and follow instructions. "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times."

Naaman does it, and his flesh is restored. It is not restored because of how wonderful Naaman is, but because of how wonderful God is. Naaman returns to Elisha's house with the

whole entourage and tries to pay Elisha for this miracle, but Elisha refuses. It was God who did the work, not him.

So where is the saint in this story?

Is it Elisha? Elisha is a prophet, which is a subset of saints. Some of the Old Testament prophets were like God-powered superheroes, and Elisha is in that category. In other stories, Elisha controls wild animals, feeds multitudes with basically nothing, and raises the dead. In this story, he does not cure Naaman's leprosy; God does. Elisha does, interestingly, inflict leprosy on one of his servants who tries to shake Naaman down for payment for God's miracle. No, Elisha is a mighty man, but he's not really a saint like most saints.

Is it Naaman? Naaman does things his way, the way of kings and generals and warlords. He gets a letter from his king and takes it to this other king and says, "Make me better." He assumes that the king can command the person who has the power to heal him. He tries to buy the power of God with money, and he believes in God only after he sees a miracle.

However, after he sees a miracle, he believes. He refuses to sacrifice to idols, even the ones he grew up with. We don't know what he does about it, but he believes. Naaman may become a saint, we don't know.

But I'd like to draw your attention to a key character in this story whom some of you may have already forgotten. The unnamed slave girl. This girl is small, weak, unimportant. But she is blessed to be a blessing to Naaman.

This girl does not have supernatural powers. She is not rich or powerful, but she has faith in God, and she has her voice. She uses what she has. She uses that voice.

She could have said nothing. It would have been easier to say nothing. It would have been safer to say nothing. What if she spoke up and Elisha didn't heal Naaman? She is a slave, and she would have caused her master to be humiliated. Depending on the household, that could have consequences ranging from a beating to death.

The girl, though, loves her enemy. She loves the man who took her from her home and likely killed people whom she knew. She loves her enemy enough that she overcomes her fear and she takes a risk.

This girl does not change the world, except that she does. She profoundly changes Naaman's world, and his wife's world, and their children's worlds and the worlds of all the people whom Naaman affects, now that he worships God.

Now there is a saint.

There is a role model for us.

There have been millions of saints throughout history, my brothers and sisters. Millions of people who have overcome their insecurity and fear enough to love God and love their neighbors. Because they loved God and their neighbors, they used whatever power they had to serve God and serve their neighbors. Because they loved their neighbors as themselves, they valued what was good for their neighbor as highly as what was good for themselves.

Some of their names we know. Francis of Assisi. Florence Nightingale. Dorothy Day. Oskar Schindler. Mother Teresa. Martin Luther King. Oscar Romero. I'm sure that you can each name other examples.

Most of their names we don't know, and we'll never know. But that's OK. God does.

Right now, it seems like every time I turn on the television, I'm told that it is all about me. I have to live in fear. Fear of other people, especially other people who don't look like me. I'm told that I'm supposed to make sure I am always perfectly safe, and that I never take any risks. That the only way to make that happen is to never act like I love anyone who isn't exactly like me.

But. That. Is. Not. True.

Jesus showed us another way.

I have millions of examples of saints to show me what it looks like to follow that way.

The way of loving God, and loving my neighbors.

This week, I pray for all of us that we follow that way.

AMEN