

Our Syrian Dilemma

Philippians 3:4b-9; 2 Kings 5:1-19

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As you must know there is a Syrian dilemma confronting the whole world — the United States, the countries of the Middle East, and indeed places far removed from the vicinity of Syria. Most of it is due to the mad and vicious leader of Syria, its President Bashar al-Assad who has shown that he is not averse to slaughtering his own people if they do not support him or dare to resist him. His cruel reign has resulted in half the Syrian citizens from being displaced from their homes and villages creating a worldwide immigration nightmare. But I have in mind today another Syrian dilemma, one that comes closer to home. Note that the sermon title is not “A” Syrian Dilemma but rather “Our” Syrian Dilemma. And while it is our problem along with many others its origins are ancient, and it is even reflected in our lesson from *II Kings* this morning.

Naaman, you see, was a Syrian, an Aramean if you will, because ancient Syria was better known as Aram in the days of Elisha 3,000 years ago.

In a sense, Naaman could almost be a symbol of our age, a metaphor for the kind of person most of us aspire to be. After all, he was a man of great standing within the realm - - - a trusted confidant and companion of the King, a successful and revered commander of the Syrian army, a man of prominence and influence. There is only one slight problem, only one fly in the ointment, only one minor qualifier in Naaman’s impressive resume. He was a leper! A mighty warrior to be sure, but a leper nonetheless. You see that little qualifier with respect to leprosy effectively canceled out all the accolades and honors that Naaman has spent his life accumulating. In most ways, any Syrian would have gladly changed places with Naaman, but if you added the little fact that he had his dreaded skin disease universally recognized as a loathsome thing, well, the lowest slave in Syrian would not want to be in Naaman’s skin. Literally or figuratively.

O yes, Naaman had everything one could desire, but alas, he also had leprosy, which, being translated means that he had nothing. And so, Naaman longed for the healing and wholeness that none of his laurels or his achievements could grant him.

Naaman’s story is a parable of the human predicament. It hits people like us especially hard because we like to believe that we were somehow predestined for places of privilege, position and possession. Like Naaman we give ourselves to making a name for ourselves. We study hard, work hard, and play hard and make all the right connections as we seek to move up

some mythical ladder of success with the desperate hopes that once we arrive, we will have an inner sense of wholeness, a sense of personal peace and fulfillment. It is what many Americans equate with salvation if we are honest about it. And that is why we invest so much of our time, energy and money in attending the right schools, wearing the right clothes, meeting the right people, joining the right clubs, living in the right neighborhoods, driving the right cars, joining the right churches, voting the right way. All designed to convince ourselves and others that we really are persons of worth and importance, which hopefully everyone will ultimately recognize. And so, we carefully construct our personal resumes and we build an impressive list of credentials and accomplishments --- only to add at the bottom of the page that damning qualifier "but we have leprosy." Of course, we may not literally have leprosy but it doesn't really matter. We may well have all of the right stuff in the world's eyes and still lack the wholeness and peace and fulfillment that we mistakenly had thought our achievements would grant us.

So Naaman the Syrian is a symbol of our age and a stereotype of so many upwardly mobile Americans. Yes, he was a mighty warrior, but he was still a leper. We are a great people too. We are mighty men and women of science and technology. We have harnessed the power of the atom and the sun, conquered many fatal diseases of our generation, sent men and machines into space and developed computers and satellite communication that connect us to people all around the globe in an instant. We have created a society that is the envy of most of the world. We too are a great people, and yet . . . despite our knowledge, our skills, our achievements, our accomplishments, this marvelous civilization we have fashioned seems to be crumbling from within. As a people we have more, and we enjoy it less than any previous generation. For the first time in the lives of many of us the future of America seems to be in peril, and not from the outside but from the inside. Marriages and families are disintegrating. There is a moral vacuum in the highest places of leadership. We have polluted the environment. The wealth of this land is continually being concentrated in fewer and fewer hands and the gap between the rich and the poor grows ever wider. Charles Murray's excellent book *Coming Apart* explores this disturbing class separation in America. And so, in spite of all of our accomplishments and credentials, there is precious little evidence that the current generation of Americans is any more spiritually whole or personally content than previous ones.

And what is true of us as a people is also true of us as individuals, the only difference being that we are far more adept at hiding our personal discontent and inner sickness. After all, we want others to think that we have it all together. We want others to believe that our careers, our homes, our possessions, our professions, our marriages, our various achievements and successes have brought us the fulfillment we sought. But we cannot deceive ourselves in these matters. When we lie awake at night and no one watching we realize that some disease as hideous as leprosy is eating away at our souls. We have tried to save ourselves and we have failed miserably. We are out of touch with God, with others, and even with our better selves. To be sure, we are a great people and great individuals, and yet. . .

Let's at least give ole Naaman some credit. At a minimum he was open to the possibility that help beyond himself was needed. And despite his pride and arrogance, he was even willing to come down off of his high horse long enough to take the advice of a little Jewish maiden who was convinced that back in the land of Israel there was a prophet of God who was quite capable of curing Naaman's leprosy. I wonder how many of us are open to the possibility that God just might be the solution to our inner discord and desperation?

Granted, Naaman had no idea what this God of Israel was like or how the Lord worked, but he set off in search of this God nonetheless. While Naaman had thought he was looking for God, the truth was that God had been looking for Naaman and had already found him in the faithful witness of this slave girl. And so, this great and highly favored man leaves Syria with a roll of bills in his pocket and truckload of elaborate gifts for his potential benefactor. He must have thought that God was some kind of exclusive dermatologist whose time and skills were available to the highest bidder. And he wanted this prophet and his God to know that he, Naaman, was no run-of-the-mill Syrian soldier, no sirree! He was a person of worth, of power, prestige and position. He could not only afford good medical care, but by Jove, a person of his stature deserved it. Naaman must have thought he had a claim on God's goodness and mercy because of who he was.

So Naaman finally arrives at Elisha's house amid all the pomp and ceremony that attended a person of his standing and with an entourage of horses and chariots that would have put to shame the Presidential caravans of our day. Naaman had even taken great pains to go through the proper protocol and had with him all kinds of letters of reference from the Kings of Syria and Israel.

And here is where the story takes a humorous and delightful turn. Here is where all of our pious and proud pretensions are shattered, and we see something of the character of God, something of the nature of human condition, and something of the nature of salvation as well. The prophet Elisha is so unimpressed by Naaman's vaunted pride, by his letters of reference and his adherence to diplomatic protocol, and so underwhelmed by Naaman's personal credentials, his *curriculum vitae*, that he doesn't even come out of his house to greet this proud Syrian face to face. Rather, Elisha sends a messenger to Naaman telling him to do something quite simple, even absurd, and certainly beneath the dignity of a man of his stature. The message was this: "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times and your flesh will be restored and you shall be clean."

Now Naaman's nose was really out-of-joint. He was angry and insulted! He had expected Elisha to come out and put on a show and to make a big deal out of healing him in a manner appropriate for a man of his position. Didn't Elisha know that Naaman was not some common ordinary Jewish Leper? Did this prophet not understand that Naaman was somebody, and a Syrian somebody at that? Why the very idea! There were rivers far better than the Jordan back in Syria. The Jordan was nothing but a mud hole in comparison with the rivers of Damascus.

What Naaman had to realize and what each of us must come to accept is that if we come to God for cleansing and healing, we come on God's terms and not on our own. God is not greatly impressed with our credentials nor moved by our sense of our own personal righteousness. No matter who we are or what we have done, each and every one of us is but a sinner deserving nothing. Consequently, we have nothing with which to bargain, no position from which we can negotiate with the Divine. God's grace is freely given but it is also priceless and cannot be bought. It is offered to prince and pauper alike. It can be received but never earned. Though we might wish that this were not the case, because we are so impressed with ourselves, God is not. We would like to think God owes us something, that we deserve God's grace.

The story of Naaman's healing reminds me in many ways of the story of the conversion of St. Paul in the book of Acts. True, one was coming from Damascus and other headed toward Damascus, but the two men still had much in common. Prior to his conversion, Saul had spent his life trying to win and earn God's approval. In time, as a faithful and obedient Jew he had chalked up quite a list of accomplishments. His resume put Naaman's to shame. Saul was a Pharisee's Pharisee. He had gone through all the rites of passage. He was knowledgeable, zealous, and in his own mind, quite righteous. He was right in saying as he did in our morning lesson that, *"If anyone has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee; as to Zeal, a persecutor of the church; and as to righteousness under the law, blameless."* Like Naaman, Saul was not lacking in self-esteem and yet. . .he too was still in need of cleansing and of redemption. He too lacked salvation, whose root meaning is wholeness, healing, health. (Think of the word *salve*, an ointment that can cure our wounds.)

Saul's encounter with the living God on the road to Damascus changed forever his perception as to what made him acceptable in the eyes of God or great as an individual. After his encounter with the risen Christ, the Apostle admits that all those things he previously thought of as making him somebody were now without worth, at least when compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ and being known by Christ. Paul says that all of his personal righteousness he now regards as garbage, as little more than refuse in compared with the righteousness that comes from God by grace through faith.

My friends, the scriptures are clear. The conversion of Saul who was to become Paul only confirms what the healing of Naaman underscored a thousand years previous. None of us has a claim upon God. It is God who has a claim upon us.

In time, Naaman would swallow his pride and do what Elisha has instructed him to do. He had to get over himself, as it were, and get over the fact that the Hebrew prophet would not come out of his house and make a big show over this important man standing at his door. Eventually, Naaman could not escape the logic of his servant who reminded him that if the prophet had asked him to do something great and heroic, he certainly would have done so. So why not comply with this simple request, however non-sensible it might seem? And finally,

after the seventh dip in the muddy Jordan, Naaman's flesh is restored and he is clean in more ways than one.

I am quite sure that there are many very important people gathered here this morning and some of you may not appreciate what I have had to say. Nevertheless, if you are approaching God, the God of the universe who fashioned you and who in Jesus Christ has accomplished your redemption, then just remember that this God is not the least bit impressed by how great you are, how popular you are, how much you have done or accomplished or accumulated over the course of your life. You can leave your *curriculum vitae* at home. It does not matter what your name is or where it is located on the social registry. Your race and ethnic origin are of no consequence. It matters not who you are, where you have been, whom you know, or what you do. All that matters is healing and wholeness that you desire is that you confess your unworthiness, accept God's redeeming grace through faith, and begin to give evidence of this confession and acceptance by doing the relatively simple things that God requires of us - - - things like loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and loving your neighbor no less than you love yourself. Our Syrian dilemma, you see, is also an American dilemma and a human dilemma and yet through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ there is a solution for it is we are open to receiving it. There is a cure for our inner sickness. It is a free gift awaiting reception.

Prayer:

Gracious God, give us the grace to open our lives to the cleansing and renewal that you wish to bestow upon us. Forbid that we should continually fall into the trap of trying to save ourselves or succumb to the temptation of believing that we or anyone else must somehow merit your love or deserve your mercy. As we search for you and for the wholeness that we crave, grant us the vision that in Jesus Christ you have already sought and found us, if we but except what you offer. Amen.