

**ON WHOSE TERMS?
Mark 1:40-45 II Kings 1:1-14
February 12, 2012**

Naaman would be considered, to use a term we recognize, a “man’s man.” “Great man.” “. . . in high favor.” “. . . a mighty warrior.” He had access to all the best his culture had to offer. In other words, he had it all . . . including a most dreaded disease – leprosy. Today we call it Hansen’s Disease and in developed nations, it has all but disappeared. For leprosy, in his day and time, there was no cure. The health care system in his country had no answer for his condition at any price. It was ultimately terminal but involved a long, debilitating, disfigurement before it snuffed the life out of its victims.

You and I know when we are really hurting; when the cold fingers of suffering and the specter of our own mortality looms near, we will try most anything to forestall, hopefully to cure, what ails us . . . even unorthodox treatments. But there were no treatments, no therapies in that day for leprosy. Then from an unexpected direction; under his nose actually, a ray of hope is found. Perhaps it’s more accurate to say it found Naaman. A young Israelite slave girl, captured and brought to Aram, approached Naaman’s wife. “There is a prophet in my country,” she ventured cautiously, “who can cure him of his leprosy.”

Remember, in extremes . . . when our life is on the line, we will grasp for help from any direction . . . even from those we may have had a low opinion of. So Naaman goes to the king and the king joins the long shot plan, gives a letter and Naaman went taking a “kings

ransom” of gifts; but, he went where his logic would lead – to the king of Israel. He went to the wrong place, the wrong person. This made the Israeli king most uneasy. What is this? “Some excuse to pick a fight on the part of a bully!?” And he did what folks did in those days when in acute anxiety. He tore his clothes.

But that prophet of which the servant girl spoke, Elisha, heard of the king’s predicament and sent a message to the king. “Send him to me,” which the king was only too glad to do. So Naaman, perhaps already beginning to doubt the wisdom of coming to this third rate nation and now being told to go to the prophet’s house which looked nothing like a dermatological leprosy clinic, was getting low on patience. Then, to add to his simmering discontent, the great prophet didn’t greet him, didn’t do incantations, gyrating gesticulations, or give him a secret salve. He sent a servant. Note: it’s the 2nd time a servant plays a key role. “Go wash in the Jordan seven times.”

That was it! His pride could stand it no longer! I could do this foolishness in Damascus and in better rivers than this Jordan creek. And he turned his face in a rage and was about to spur his horse when once again, servants play a key role. “Sir,” they humbly intoned, “You’d have climbed a high mountain, swum a deep sea. All the prophet asked was “wash and be clean.” So Naaman, against his better judgment, managed to set aside his pride and followed Elisha’s plan of treatment. Seven baths later, his skin was that of a young boy. Clean! Healed!

There’s more to the story, but that’s enough for us to digest now. May I point out,

rather highlight, some points you no doubt noticed.

First, the role of the servant. Three times they acted humbly and decisively . . . or Naaman would have become a very obscure footnote in history, a successful general who died prematurely of leprosy. What a pity! Again and again that servant role, particularly in the New Testament emerges as a role, a model of what it means to be godly; to be a disciple of the living God in Jesus Christ.

Second. The story if about breaking down barriers and realizing God is bigger than the Jews thought. They wanted to lay claim to God and stoutly believed they occupied a special and exclusive place in God’s eyes. Then along comes an outsider, an enemy and frankly they were scandalized. God cares about them . . . it’s the same initial reaction today for us when it comes to Arabs, Iranians, Taliban . . . even free-spending liberals and stout, rigid, conservative Republicans. Well, we know that but having been party to some conversations when it seemed we were safe among our own, one wonders if we believe it.

Third, we often make life more complicated and substitute our desire to control for simple obedience and faith. A pastor tells the story of when his infant son was plagued by an annoying skin rash. They took him to the pediatrician repeatedly who prescribed expensive cortisone cream. It helped but they were disappointed that it didn’t fully eliminate the problem.

“We mentioned it to my mother that we were frustrated about this rash.” She said, “When you were a baby and had a rash we’d just smear a little vegetable shortening on your bottom. That did the trick.”

We patiently smiled at my mother’s archaic remedy. Pediatric care had come a long way since then. But, the cortisone didn’t work so we caved in and gave it a try. What harm could it do?

You know the rest of the story. We were utterly amazed. It worked. We told the pediatrician . . . who scoffed. “That’s impossible.”¹

Why there’s some things science can’t explain and money can’t buy. Ask those parents. Ask Naaman . . . both possessors of clear healthy skin.

Recall, however, it almost didn’t happen and that brings us to the 4th point: Naaman’s pride nearly cost him his life. He expected to pay and was prepared to pay handsomely. The General wanted to be in control and not be beholding or in debt to anyone. Pride.

When told to bathe in the Jordan, he almost rode off in a huff. It was beneath him. He wanted his answer on his terms. Pride can be a subtle and powerful force, tucked nicely behind a gracious, respectable veneer . . . until challenged and exposed.

¹ Pulpit Resource Vol 40, No. 1, Jan-Feb 2012, p 31

Another pastor relates talking with a person who had been going through a tough time. Her personal life was out of control as she lurched from one relationship to another. She had issues with addiction and depression. As we talked I thought that what she most needed was an outlet for her talent and energy. Naively I noted, “Your life isn’t going to get much better sitting here in your expensive home, worrying about your aches and pains.” Then the pastor noted, “Jesus really teaches that in giving, we receive. We are meant to be givers rather than just receivers. You may discover that you’ve been given gifts that can help in the healing of others and, as you give, you will be healed.”

Her response? “Look, I’m a well-educated modern person. Do you really think that some ancient teacher who lived in an insignificant corner of the world in the 1st century has anything to teach me? My problems are complicated. I need more than this ‘Love your neighbor’ stuff.”²

And she went away disgruntled and mired in her stated of discontent, pride and illnesses.

A lively story like Naaman’s, may be, for those who hear, an occasion to do a personal inventory. How does pride dictate to me and keep me from what I really need? We can insist on our own terms or accept on God’s. (It’s like a layman insisting he wants to be awake during surgery so he can tell the surgeon how to do the procedure).

Naaman’s pride nearly cost him his life. Humility and trust, unwillingly at first, gave it back to him. He listens and takes heed. In enlightened businesses today, some new practices are taking hold. Managers are listening to workers at the bottom of the proverbial food chain, people who are closest to the action. It’s dignifying to the line worker and if the manager really listens, insightful. Naaman listened to a series of subordinates, took the plunge and by God’s grace came up clear and clean.

Four points, though there are others, we can draw from this narrative and perhaps take home:

1. Don’t despise the servant role. Honor it.
2. God is bigger than we think and breaks down barriers.
3. We make life too complicated, substituting our need for control.
4. Pride is costly; grace is free

And healing . . . wholeness follows.



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February 12, 2012

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² *ibid*, p. 32