



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

"An Amazing Story of Power"

II Kings 5: 1-14

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.

The story of Naaman the Syrian general is one of my favorite Old Testament stories because it is rich in irony and drama. It is a story about healthcare delivery, but more importantly, it is a story about the nature of power. What I propose to do today is: 1. Look at the story from the perspective of the

healing miracle. 2. Examine the power dynamics in the story. 3. Examine how this story might speak to us today.

I

First as a miracle story: Naaman, a general in the army of the King of Aram (Syria) was ill. He had leprosy, one of a number of different skin diseases that afflicted the ancients in the Middle East. It was unsightly and because the origins of it were unknown, those who were afflicted with it were alienated and removed from the mainstream of society. Lepers inspired dread in others. They were despised and marginalized. They were believed to be physically and spiritually unclean and immoral.

Syria, because of its geographical relationship with Israel, was a natural foe, and at different times in its history, the Syrians raided and conquered Israel, (Considering the present Middle East crisis, we might conclude with *Ecclesiastes* that there is nothing new under the sun!) These conquering raids brought the Syrians wealth and also slaves. Naaman, the General, returning to Syria from his conquests in Israel, brought his wife a young girl, a Hebrew girl, from one of his raids. She would serve as a maid, but in essence was a slave. She was absolutely powerless, owning nothing, not even her own life. But this is where the story begins to take a turn.

Apparently the healthcare system in Syria could not help Naaman. The young Hebrew slave girl, (a prize of war!) had compassion on her master, Naaman, and told him that there was a prophet in Israel who could cure him. Naaman wanted to see this prophet, and so he received a "referral" from his king who said: "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went to Israel, and soon found himself at the door step of the prophet Elijah. Naaman wanted to see the prophet, but the prophet would not see him.... Instead he sent his servant with a message.

(Once again we have a parallel with our modern healthcare system: You want to see the doctor, but can't get past the voicemail.) The message is simple: "Go wash yourself seven times in the Jordan and you will be well." Naaman was angry. He felt that he had been disrespected. He received the medical equivalent of "take two aspirins and call me in the morning." Finally, he was persuaded by his own servant: "look.. can it hurt? Give it try?" Naaman did, and was healed.

This miracle story should intrigue us. Healing, according to this story did not occur because of Naaman's faith. All along the way, Naaman was skeptical, had doubts and wanted to pack it in. Healing did not occur because he had the right belief. He was a Syrian general, an enemy of Israel.

Instead, we learn that the grace of God, the love of God, the healing of God knows no borders nor nationalities. The Hebrew people who first read this story would be upset because God healed someone who was their natural foe, literally someone brought great harm to their people. But the lesson was not lost... God heals out of network... God loves all God's people.

II

This is also a story of power. It is the story of powerful men and powerless slaves. Let us take them one by one: Naaman was a general. He was a military leader who had many troops under his command. He must have been a very important military leader because his king was willing to help him out. Yet, Naaman, for all his power was compromised by his illness. For all his power, he could not heal himself.

The second figure is unnamed, Naaman's King. He, too, wielded a great deal of power in the eyes of the world. Kings had the power of life and death, and were regarded as gods. Yet for all his power, he couldn't help his military leader.

The King of Israel was the third figure of power. He, too, acknowledged the life and death power of a king and feared that if Naaman wasn't cured, Syria would attack Israel. He interpreted the letter from the King of Aram as a message of provocation. He was so afraid that he tore his clothes as a symbol of his fear.

Here we have three of the most powerful individuals in two adjacent nations. Naaman, the general, was a leper. His king was dependent upon another king for Naaman's health. And the King of Israel was scared out of his wits. They had all the temporal power in the world and yet they were paralyzed and helpless. They had no control over the course of events and seemed to be in the hands of fate. They were powerless.

But there were three other characters around whom this story turned. These three individuals are the true power brokers in this story and reveal a great deal about the nature of power. Elisha the prophet was the first. He was in control right from the beginning. He was not motivated by fear, nor did he react to the situation. He was aghast at the fear expressed by his king and told him to send Naaman to him right away. Elisha was a prophet, one who was intimate with God and who spoke God's message to people. He was the vehicle for healing... and ultimately his prescription did the trick.

But there were two other characters who intrigue me. They were the two unnamed slaves. In this story of healing and power...it was the powerless, anonymous slaves who had the most influence over the events. Consider: slaves do not own their own lives! But in this story, the powerful are absolutely dependent upon them.

The story began with the words of a Hebrew slave girl. "I think that there is a prophet in Israel who can heal him." Her words did more to change the course of history than the actions of generals and kings. The way the story was written, she was the prime mover behind things... a powerless, unnamed female slave. Yet, in the eyes of the Bible, in the eyes of God, she was the central figure of power in this narrative. What was her motivation? Compassion: the power of love.

The second was Naaman's servant, who calmed Naaman when he was told to wash in the Jordan 7 times. Naaman was angered by his "prescription." Naaman was ready to head home to Syria and start some real trouble... instead his servant, a powerless (once again, un-named) servant, prevailed upon him to try the Jordan.. and Naaman was healed. The story turned on the words or direction of a person, a servant, who by all earthly standards was powerless.

Jesus proclaimed that the last shall be first and the first shall be last. He spoke about paradoxes that seem strange to us... yet in this amazing story: the weak are the powerful, and the mighty are pulled down from their thrones.

III

What does this story say to us today? Although I have cast it in terms of power and healthcare, I believe that it has an extremely profound message for us.

- First it speaks to the body politic.... Power, whatever it is, is temporal. It does not last forever and thus should be wielded with humility.
- Second, History is often taught as the story of the great events and "powerful" people. But in truth history is the story of little events, single sentences and seemingly inconsequential people who make all the difference. The Bible is truly a "people's history" It is the story of God working through second sons, slaves, and outcasts who impact the direction of history itself. It is the story of Moses vs Pharaoh; David vs Goliath; Esther vs Haman; and Jesus vs Caesar.

- Third... there are times when we feel that things are out of control.. there are times when we feel our lives are inconsequential and we have nothing to contribute. There are times when we get really down on ourselves and think that we are worthless in the eyes of others and in the eyes of God... We sometimes fall prey to the belief that our lives do not make a difference. The story of the Hebrew slave girl challenges that notion. The power of the world, God has placed in the hands of the weak and the nameless....

The story of Naaman is an amazing story of power.... Not human power... but the power of God that is made perfect in the weakness of human beings.... Like me and you.. This is the good news of the Gospel. Amen.