

**Blacksburg Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. William Love**  
**Sunday, February 15, 2009**

**HE WAS MADE CLEAN**

1 Kings 5:1-14  
1 Corinthians 9:24-27  
Mark 1:40-45

One of the churches I served had a cadre of members who volunteered as office assistants during the week to answer the phone, help get mailings out, and other duties. One of them was a sweet and gentle man, who was in his 80s. He was retired, and his wife had died of cancer.

In the last weeks of his wife's life when she was homebound and bedridden, he was constantly by her side, tending to her needs. One of the things they found helpful was to have an audio tape of the worship service that they could listen to when neither was able to attend and for their own spiritual nourishment.

After his wife's death, he volunteered to work in the office one afternoon a week. One of the things that was important to him was that the tape ministry continue. It was no longer being done. I heard him on several occasions tell people in the office how important it had been to him and his wife. And nothing happened. He asked me about getting it started up again. It had been overseen by the Deacons, and I suggested he talk with the Moderator of the Board of Deacons.

I'm not sure if he did or not, though I suspect he did. And nothing happened.

It was almost comical. He was telling everyone who would listen, and nothing was happening.

Then it became more comical when it occurred to me that he was a retired doctor. For all his work life, he was accustomed to saying something and have a nurse or someone in his office do it right away. In retirement, his former position of prominence did not have others at his beck and call.

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*<sup>1</sup>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.*

Naaman was a man of authority, of prominence. He controlled much of his life and was not accustomed to not being in control and being able to get things done.

*The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy.* Despite his position of authority, despite the high regard in which his master held him, he was as powerless as a retired doctor trying to get a tape of a worship service recorded and distributed to those who needed it.

No help would come from the halls of power to which he had access. Leprosy was an enemy his armies could not conquer. His being well-connected meant nothing against it.

Then word came from a slave captured from Israel, who was servant to his wife. That's about as low and unregarded as you could be in this story. She told Naaman's wife that there was a prophet in Israel.

So as one accustomed to power and politics, he gathered together sufficient wealth and got a letter of recommendation from the king, sent to his counterpart, the one the king figured would be powerful enough to offer help, the king of Israel.

When the king of Israel got the letter, he tore his clothes because he knew he was incapable of offering help (he thought it ludicrous to even think that he could) and could only deduce that this was an attempt to gain intelligence for an attack on Israel.

Elisha heard about it and sent word to the king to have Naaman come to see him. So Naaman came with his horses and chariots (and the considerable wealth he had brought with

him) and went to Elisha's house.

He waited outside. To receive someone of his stature, his experience told him the protocol was for Elisha to come out to meet him and show deference to his position and power. Elisha did not. <sup>10</sup>*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."*

Naaman was infuriated. *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!* Angered first of all by the social and political snub. Then by the insult of being told to wash in the River Jordan, which he considered to be no more than a dirty ditch. And he went away in a rage.

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The text tells us Naaman was an Aramean. Without that bit of information, I could have thought he was an 21<sup>st</sup> century American, perhaps even a Presbyterian, almost certainly a member of a mainline denomination.

We are people who may not think of ourselves as prominent and powerful people, certainly not on the scale of Naaman. But we are people of considerable means – financially, educationally, socially – to have considerable control over our own lives.

One friend of mine, whose first call was to a church in a textile town in North Carolina, told of the ministers in town being given a tour of one of the mills. He noticed that the Baptist ministers knew the millworkers while he knew the management. In North Carolina, if you go back as far as I paid attention to it, which is back to the 50s, (though I don't about Mike Easley or Bev Perdue) there has been only one governor who was not a Presbyterian. It is fairly common for Presbyterian congregations to number among their members business leaders, doctors, lawyers, people of critical importance to the social fabric of the community and active in service organizations.

We are like Naaman.

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Then the bravest characters appear – his servants, daring to speak out to correct him when he is enraged. <sup>13</sup>*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'?"*

Elisha had told him to do something very simple really. Naaman thought it was beneath him; maybe he thought it was not difficult enough, certainly it would be more difficult than that, if he had to do anything at all. So with his solution right in front of him, he was going to act in a self-destructive way. Perhaps it was that the powerful man was put in the position of being a helpless receiver, more like a beggar than a general. He was like Peter when Jesus was going to wash his feet. Naaman was used to being the giver, the mover, the shaker, the master of his own fate.

We are like Naaman.

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The more I thought about Naaman, the more it seemed to me that the circumstances of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian church are like Naaman.

Those of us who are older grew up in a church society, when it was expected that, when you moved to a new community, you would seek out a church. We can no longer assume that. If you didn't seek out a church, you were a non-believer, and evangelism meant convincing you to make the decision to believe. When we were in some sense a Christian nation, and that mission work for the church really meant foreign missions. I remember in seminary how American Presbyterians were incensed when the Korean Presbyterian Church began sending missionaries to the United States.

We remember that the church expressed opinions on important cultural matters of the day, and the culture listened. The voice of the church was important. And it was generally assumed that the church would be supportive of the goals of the broader culture.

We can no longer make these assumptions.

Now coaches of youth athletic teams tell their players they've got to get their priorities straight in choosing between church and a Sunday morning game or practice.. Civic clubs hold fundraisers on Sundays, including in the morning. Civic celebrations are held on Sundays. One pastor tells of the community he served, which was generally friendly to churches, approving a Sunday morning 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration in the park next to the church. The band played the song *Cocaine*, just as the congregation was worshiping. The city had given no thought to a potential conflict with the churches in its community.

We once proud, influential mainline churches, who had grown accustomed to a favored position in our culture, wait with the world outside our door, expecting that the world should come in to us (as Naaman expected Elisha to come to him) and increasingly the world does not, but merely ignores us.

And we as individuals and as the church are people who live lives which are not immune from anxieties, which seem beyond our ability to provide remedy, certainly not within our comfort zone.

We are like Naaman.

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I believe the starting point for us is where Naaman had to get to for himself.

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<sup>40</sup>*A leper came to him begging [Jesus], and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean."*

The leper knew his need. The leper knew his inability to solve it for himself. The leper went to the source of help, recognizing his dependence on it.

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I'm not sure that Naaman was entirely convinced when he came to Elisha, and even less so when Elisha gave his silly instructions. Had his servants not intervened, I think he would have gone back home, bemoaning his fate and thinking Elisha to be a charlatan.

And though it is not included in the verses in the lection, when Naaman did do what Elisha had said and was cured, he went back to Elisha to give the wealth he had brought with him in payment for the healing. That would even the balance sheet, so he would not be in debt to Elisha or Elisha's God. And Elisha refused it. The healing was one which Naaman experienced as a debt, an obligation. Only when he couldn't buy it did he come to understand it was an act of grace, a gift given to Naaman with no strings attached.

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So the leper came to Jesus as Naaman came to Elisha, the one in need comes to God for help. The Church stands before God in need of help. Individually we stand before God in need of help. Our life experience tells us we should be able to do it ourselves. And we try. We try with our wits and resources to build the kingdom of God in this place or at least a church.

Naaman needed to get where the leper was. He came recognizing his limitations. He came in humility, kneeling and said, If you choose, you can make me clean. If you choose, you can make me whole.

And we Presbyterians, God bless us, need to come to God and say, If you choose, you can make us whole. Individually, we need to come to God and say, If you choose....

And the leper was made clean, and Jesus gave him two instructions. To keep his mouth shut, and to go through the ritual of restoration required by the law.

The leper was so happy he couldn't contain himself and told what had happened to him,

so that Jesus could no longer enter a town openly.

Jesus was not seeking celebrity, though he got it. Those who heard came to him from every quarter to have their misery relieved. They were at risk of believing that, where the Jesus is, there is no misery, no pain.

That misunderstanding could lead to a gospel of prosperity, that God provides both relief from misery and provides material abundance to the faithful.

What stands in the way of that is the cross.

It is neither my experience or belief that God protects us from pain. My experience and my belief tell me that, where there is misery, where there is pain, where there is need, there is Jesus the Christ.

That, I believe, is where our hope lies.

Of course, it all depends on what God's answer is. And the answer we get will be the one the leper got: I do choose; be made clean.