

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost, Old Testament, Year C

A BETTER WAY

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23)

Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

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. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. 2Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. 3She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." 7When 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." 8But 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." 9So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. 10Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." 11But 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! 12Are 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. 13But 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'?" 14So 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. 15Then 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; please accept a present from your servant."

DIAGNOSIS: The Way of the World

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): I Deserve the Best
Who can blame Naaman for being indignant? After all, he's a "great man" in high favor with his master (v. 1). He's successful; a VIP of the highest order. We all know VIPs need to be treated extra-specially. How insulting that Elisha doesn't even come out and talk to him when he arrives. How insulting to be told to go wash himself in the filthy Jordan river. How dare a man of his caliber be so disrespectfully treated (vv. 10-11). But hey, he's in a bind. He has leprosy. He needs help. Yet, he expects that help be delivered with the pomp and fanfare he deserves.

Modern-day Naaman to God: "Geez God, I've got this xyz problem and I want you to solve it for me. Remember me? I've been a soldier in your army for a long time—and dare I remind, a darned good one at that! If you do as I ask, I promise I'll be an even better soldier! Put in double-time and such. I'll make you proud."

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): My Way Is the Only Way

Naaman arrives with an entourage of horses and chariots and 6,000 shekels of gold and 10 sets of garments (vv. 5 & 9). Call that clout. He is only acting the way we all act—as if God and his prophets respond to power and bribes. Frankly, according to the system that regulates the world (the Law), Naaman does deserve good treatment. He can even pay for it. Don't we operate likewise, as if God is bound by his Law, as if the law of debits-and-credits, of reciprocity, is the only way to live? But doesn't that very slavery-to-the-Law reveal our trust in ourselves and our un-trust of God?

God to modern Naaman: "Why do you assume I operate the way you operate? You have a much bigger problem than xyz, Naam. You actually have no clue who I am, and you obviously don't trust me."

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Not Healed

Naaman is so insulted by the un-spectacular solution Elisha offers him that he stomps away "in a rage" (v. 12). Call that turning your back on salvation (healing). Had his servants not stopped him, he never would have been healed. He'd have leprosy to his dying day. Worse, he never would have "known" the God of Israel.

God to modern Naaman: "Have it your way. You're on your own."

Modern Naaman to God: "This is HELL!"

PROGNOSIS: God's Way

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Way of the Cross

The odd thing about this story is that Naaman hears about the God of Israel from the humblest of the humble, the lowest of the low—a girl slave (vv. 2-3). Plus, it is his servants who ultimately convince him to give the Jordan a try (v. 13). (Remember that the king of Israel had long ago washed his hands

of the affair). Wonder of wonders, when Naaman actually does as he's instructed and takes the plunge, he is healed (v. 14), without any fanfare. But he/we recognize mercy when we see it.

All of which is perhaps a signal that God's "way" is not our way. In fact, some 3,000 years later, we know that Naaman's healing foreshadowed a much greater healing, when God healed the entire world. And just as then, God's "way" was totally unexpected, the "lowliest" way you could think of—via the suffering and death of Jesus, his Christ. Call it the way of the cross. The Law did get its way; it accused, convicted and executed the Son of God, but in so doing, invalidated itself. Easter morning God overturned its verdict, inaugurating a whole new "way."

Jesus to all Naamans-in-hell: "I'm going with you." [to hell]
God to Jesus: "What a kid! Get back up here, and bring your friends with you."

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Internalizing the New Way

Naaman has to swallow a lot of pride, (let's say, die to himself), trust the promise and wade into the Jordan River. But then, not just his skin, but also his heart get cleaned up. He confesses: "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel" (v. 15).

Instead of power-and-might clout, God's mercy-and-forgiveness has healed (saved) him. Same with us...When we trust the-one-who-went-to-hell-in-order-to-get-us-out, when we plunge into and are washed in the forgiveness-giving, Spirit-delivering water of baptism, our arrogant hearts dissolve into hearts that automatically live God's way, the-way-of-the-cross, the way of mercy and forgiveness.

Modern Naaman: "I'm free! I'm free from the Law. That heavy

chain of slavery has fallen off my back.”

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): You (My Neighbor) Deserve the Best

Naaman goes back to Syria and brings part of Israel’s earth along—a way to signify that from then on, he will worship the God of Israel (vv. 17-18). He’s a changed man, both literally on the outside, and also on the inside. If I could add to the ending, I’d depict him bouncing that little slave girl on his lap, inviting his servants to his dinner table, and so on. Even more, I’d show him telling everyone he could about the wonderful healing available to all through the unfathomable God-of-Israel. And isn’t that our script too? Seeing everyone as deserving of God’s love and mercy, not just the mighty and powerful? And then treating them as such?

Modern Naaman to Neighbor: “Can I walk alongside you? How can I help? Can I tell you something wonderful? You deserve the best.”