***TOO PROUD TO BE HEALED?***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church

July 3, 2016

Texts: 2 Kings 5:1-14 and 1 Peter 5:5b-6

Tomorrow Americans will celebrate with pride our nation’s 240th birthday. Fireworks will blaze, bands will play, and parades will parade amid a sea of red, white and blue. We are rightfully proud of our nation, its heritage and the freedoms we enjoy, including the freedom to gather here for worship each week. Our nation is not perfect, but there is much for which to be proud. This weekend is our national opportunity to express that pride in a multitude of ways. In the context of this weekend, it is of more than passing interest that the Old Testament lectionary passage for today is this obscure story of Naaman and Elisha. Lectionary readings have no connection with national celebrations; the same reading will be read today in churches all around the world. Yet this story has particular relevance for us as we celebrate this Fourth of July weekend, for it speaks a word of warning about the dangers of pride that is not tempered with humility.

Naaman, was the commander of the army of the King of Syria. Naaman was highly regarded and well-respected as a superior warrior and capable leader of the troops. He had risen to a place of prominence in the king’s eyes in large part because the king’s treasury was stocked with the fruits of Naaman’s conquests. Naaman had a lot going for him by the king’s (and the world’s) standards. But he had one big problem: Naaman was a leper. He suffered from some skin disorder that was more serious than chronic acne, though not as dire as the disease we now call leprosy. It was the one foe he could not conquer – this leprosy that waged war on his skin.

Naaman knew nothing good of the God of Abraham and Moses. He was from Syria, not Israel. Yet so desperate for healing was he, that when an Israelite slave girl suggested that a Hebrew prophet in Samaria might cure him, he jumped at the possibility. With the consent of his king he left Syria and headed for Israel with horses and chariots loaded with silver and gold to purchase a cure for his pain. He was not too proud to seek help from a foreigner, but he would not ask for a handout. He would pay for his healing in silver and gold. Naaman also carried a letter from the King of Syria asking the King of Israel to cure the leprosy. The slave girl had suggested that Naaman see the *prophet* in Samaria, but Naaman was the commander of the Syrian army; he would go right to the top, to the king!

This was not particularly good news for the King of Israel. He was fearful of Naaman, and the letter from the King of Syria demanded from him a miracle that he could not provide. Israel’s king had no healing powers; he had no cure for leprosy. In this impossible request for healing the King of Israel saw a pretext for war, anticipating that when he denied the request of the King of Syria because he could not heal the commander of his troops, the incensed king would let loose Naaman and his army upon Israel. The King of Syria had asked for more than Israel’s king could possibly give, and he had sent his five-star general as collection agent.

At first reading I wondered why the King of Israel didn’t think immediately of the Lord and the prophet Elisha. Why did he panic instead of turning to God for help? Perhaps he was just weak, or perhaps he was just like us. Faced with a difficult demand with no rational solution, with a crisis on the horizon and no earthly idea of how to avoid it, doubt and despair tend to drown out the voice of faith that says with God all things are possible. Fears fill our hearts and our ears with dire predictions until the still, small voice of God can be heard to say, “Do not be afraid! I will be with you!” Even hearing that voice we may doubt it.

Israel’s king had major doubts; he needed a miracle, but it would not come from his hand. The prophet Elisha heard about Naaman’s visit and told the king to send Naaman to him. The king was happy to do so – happy to send the commander of Syria’s army anywhere – and so he did as Elisha suggested and sent Naaman to the prophet. So it was that the commander of the Syrian army arrived at Elisha’s door with his entourage of horses, chariots, gold, silver and brass band, ready to impress this prophet who might heal him; he knocked at the door and stood back, ready to give the prophet a chance to heal the mighty Naaman, commander of the army of Syria. But when the door opened, it was not the prophet but a lowly servant bearing a message: “Elisha says you are to go, wash in the Jordan seven times; your flesh will be restored and you will be clean. Thanks for stopping. Have a nice day.” Then the door closed.

I wonder what shade of purple Naaman’s face turned at that moment. Pride which had swelled with his military victories had convinced him that he was someone of importance. He had come to believe the press clippings and glowing comments about him back home. He stood at Elisha’s closed door, treated like a common leper by a lowly prophet. Naaman’s pride had been wounded in two respects – by Elisha’s failure to appear in person and by Elisha’s request that Naaman do something as simple as washing in the Jordan River. Naaman was a warrior, a doer of great deeds, but the healing of his leprosy demanded humility that was beyond his reach at that moment. It demanded that he acknowledge that the prophet of Israel was greater than the commander of the Syrian army and need not meet him in person. It demanded that Naaman do what was instructed, no matter how mundane. It demanded that he wash in the Jordan River, a body of water that is less than pristine. One historian has described that river in these terms:

*Mostly silent and black in spite of its speed, but now and then breaking into praise and whitening foam, Jordan scours along muddy between banks of mud, careless of beauty, careless of life.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Wash in the muddy waters of the Jordan! You would come out more diseased than when you went in! You might as well drink water from the tap in Flint, MI! There were waters back home in Syria that were far better than this sluggish Jordan ditch. What could the Jordan waters do that the clear, pure waters back home could not do? Wading into those filthy waters was asking too little of him, and so was asking too much.

It is sometimes hard to do the easy thing. We want something worthy of our talents, our skills, our place in life; we forego the blessings of the easy thing, the gift of the simple thing asked of us. Perhaps that is why Jesus says that unless we become like children we can never enter the kingdom; we must be willing to do not only the heroic and courageous things, not only the noteworthy or praiseworthy things, but also the simple things that even a child might do. For Naaman, that meant washing in the river Jordan.

Naaman would have turned his back on the Jordan and remained a leper for life, but his servants saved him from that fate. “If the prophet had told you to do something difficult or daring, you’d have done it,” they said. “So why not do something so simple as to wash and be clean?” The hard thing for the proud military commander was being obedient to a simple order from a simple prophet to do a simple thing; the hard thing was to set aside his pride and act with humility. When he did – when he finally relented, bent his knees, and washed in the Jordan as Elisha had told him to do – he was healed and his flesh restored.

Too proud to be healed – that was almost Naaman’s story – almost, but not quite. Somehow, he found just enough humility to be healed. How about you? Does pride sometimes get in the way for you? Are you too proud to accept the help God offers through the hand of others? Are we as a nation too proud to admit our mistakes and strive to be better? Are we too proud to be healed by God in whatever way we may need healing? In his autobiography, Malcolm X describes his first experience trying to pray after his religious conversion. He writes:

*The hardest test I ever faced in my life was praying…bending my knees to pray – that act – well, that took me a week. You know what my life had been. Picking a lock to rob someone’s house was the only way my knees had ever been bent before. I had to force myself to bend my knees. And waves of shame and embarrassment would force me back up. For evil to bend its knees, admitting its guilt, to implore the forgiveness of God, is the hardest thing in the world.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

For pride to bend its knees in prayer or contrition or simple humility is a hard thing, but a necessary thing for healing – sometimes for your body but always for your soul. Can you do that? Can you bend your knees and bend your stubborn will and come to God humbly willing to do whatever God asks – wash in dirty river waters or pound nails in Wyoming, WV or accept a gift of grace from someone else’s hand? “We cannot make ourselves humble,” writes Stephen Cherry, “but that does not mean that we should not aspire to humility.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Such aspirations are not those of the person who says, “Of my many great qualities, humility is my best!” They are aspirations of those who live in simple, grateful obedience to God’s will, whatever God’s will may be. Almost four hundred years ago, John Selden suggested,

*Humility is a virtue all preach, none practice; and yet everybody is content to hear.[[4]](#endnote-4)*

As God’s people, as a church, as a nation, may we aspire for more – aspire not only to preach humility, not only to hear humility, but to practice it, to temper our pride and be humble enough to be healed by God of all that ails us. Amen

1. George Adam Smith, *Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, p.486 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Ballantine Books: New York, 1964, pp.169-170 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Stephen Cherry, *Barefoot Disciple*, Continuum Publishing: New York, 2011, p.42 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. John Selden, *Table Talk: Humility*, cited in Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations, p.238 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)