
The Story of Naaman: The Story of Grace

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
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The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

Jesus said, "I do choose. Be made clean." -Mark 1.41

I don't want to hear any more jokes about Episcopalians not knowing scripture, or about Episcopalians being "God's frozen chosen" (like we heard earlier this week!)

But I will admit this. I will wager that half of the folks in this room do not know the story of Naaman. Naaman was a commander in the Syrian Army, a mighty warrior, but he had leprosy. He was not a Jew, not an Israelite. But his story is one of faith, bitterness, healing, and blessing.

The story is set in the ninth century B.C., as the United Kingdom of Israel is falling apart. Foreigners are slowly taking over the country. Naaman is one of them, an Aramean, which is the old name for the Syrians. A hundred years after this story, the Northern Kingdom will indeed fall, to the Assyrians.

Naaman had leprosy, but the disease did not seem to weaken him. We don't know exactly what this Old Testament leprosy was. It wasn't exactly like a skin cancer, but it was similar.

Many of us know what cancer is like, don't we? We know that sometimes that cancer is growing in our bodies, and we do not feel a thing. We do not notice a thing, so insidious is cancer. It has defeated many of our family and friends. But we also know that folks can often function quite well even though they have cancer.

Naaman was one of these folks. He functioned quite well, though he had leprosy. He was a mighty warrior, scripture says. In fact, he had functioned so well that he had received servants from his victories. On one of his raids, he had taken captive a young Israelite girl. That young girl now served the wife of Naaman.

The young girl said to Naaman's wife. "You know, my lord Naaman ought to go over to my home country and see the prophet Elisha. That prophet over there in Samaria would certainly heal him." Now, that must have sounded like a presumptive and impudent suggestion.

But Naaman was willing to try anything, like many folks with diseases are often willing to try anything. Going over to the land of Samaria for a new kind of treatment would be a bit like going down to some new clinic in Mexico as a last resort for the healing of cancer. Sometimes, that's what we do.

So, after some political skirmishes, Naaman gets to Elisha. I'm passing over the political skirmishes this morning. But please remember that we always have political skirmishes. The way to healing almost always goes through political friction, political grandstanding, political skirmishes. That is our human nature.

But the way to healing almost always goes through something else. When Naaman approaches the great prophet, Elisha, he actually gets bitter and angry first. For Elisha, the great prophet of Samaria, says to Naaman, "Go wash in the Jordan River seven times, and you shall be clean."

Well, that might sound fine and good to us. We all have been brought up to rejoice in the Jordan River. But, for Naaman, the river Jordan is a foreign river. He doesn't want to get into a foreign river. He complains, "Aren't the rivers in Damascus, where I grew up, aren't they better than all the rivers in Israel? Couldn't I just go wash in them and be made clean?" And with that, Naaman stalks away in a rage.

We've been there before. In our illnesses, and in our distress, in our outright frustration with still another delay, we have let anger seize control over us. We have let the root of bitterness within us take growth for a moment. Anger in sickness is not uncommon. Sometimes the way of healing passes through the root of bitterness. Let it pass through.

It is his servants who approach Naaman to calm him down. "What could possibly be difficult about getting into the Jordan River?" they ask. Maybe your pride will be broken, but this is not a difficult prescription. So Naaman submits himself to the treatment; he goes down and immerses himself seven times in the Jordan River.

Behold! Scripture says "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean."

The story of Naaman does not end there. There are several more twists, and Naaman ends up being used as an example by Jesus himself eight hundred years later.

This story is a beautiful case of God's healing. God uses those around us to heal us! Remember, it was the young servant girl who made the first step toward healing. Even though she was captive. Even though she had been forcibly seized from her home, she was able to carry the message of God's grace to the family she served.

In fact, that young Israelite girl was a symbol of the promise given to her ancestor Abraham. "Through you, through you and your seed, all the peoples of the world will be blessed." That Israelite girl made good her service to Naaman's family. God uses folks like that young girl for the healing of the world. God then used Naaman's servants again to persuade him to turn back to the Jordan.

God produces healing by using the folks around us. And that community has the power, the power of God, to defeat even the inevitable bitterness that rises in our sick hearts.

The truth is that all of us have some sort of leprosy. All of us have some sort of cancer. It may not be the physical kind. It may be just that root of bitterness, that vein of anger, which explodes every now and then. It may be growing inside us and we are not even aware of it.

The way of healing will always journey through that root, too; and the way of God's healing will overcome it.

There was incredible news this week. For the first time in seventy years, the number of annual deaths due cases in the United States has dropped. We are making progress in our healing of cancer; that is the work of God.

Later in scripture, in the gospel of Luke (4.27), when Jesus cites the story of Naaman, it is to illustrate a difficult principle. It is this: God seeks out foreigners. God sometimes leaves the people of God in order to seek out the foreigner. God leaves the ninety-nine perfectly good sheep to seek after the one lost sheep.

God seeks out those different from us, and heals them. Sometimes, the people of God don't like this principle (just like the folks in Jesus' hometown, at Luke chapter 4). We're like Naaman himself. Aren't our own people, back home, good enough?

But God chooses to heal even those foreigners. God chooses to heal those who look unclean to us, those who do not fit in.

One of the most serious diseases of our time is not cancer or leprosy at all. It is the disease of exclusivism. It is the disease

which believes that God blesses us, but God does not bless anyone not like us. It happens all over the world. We become possessive and selfish with the grace of God.

Let me tell you a story that has been repeated often. It has just been published in a new book by Miroslav Volf, titled *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*. It's a powerful book, and the Archbishop of Canterbury has named it the Lenten Study Book for 2006.

But in its opening pages, Miroslav Volf recounts this story from Fyodor Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*. (There, I've just given you your reading for Lent this year!). I'll use his words:

Dostoevsky tells a story about an old peasant woman, very wicked, who dies without leaving a single good deed behind. All she did, she did for herself alone, illicitly taking what she could take and acquiring by legitimate means what she could acquire, but not giving anything to anyone, nothing useful or beautiful, not helpful deeds, not even a kind look. After she died, the devil seized her and plunged her into the lake of fire. ..

So her guardian angel stood and wondered what good deed of hers he could remember to tell to God; "she once pulled up an onion in her garden," said he, "and gave it to a beggar woman." And God answered: "You take that onion then, hold it out to her in the lake, and let her take hold and be pulled out. And if you can pull her out of the lake, let her come to Paradise, but if the onion breaks, then the woman must stay where she is." The angel ran to the woman and held out the onion to her. "Come," said he, "catch hold and I'll pull you out." He began cautiously pulling her out.

He had just pulled her right out, when the other sinners in the lake, seeing how she was being pulled drawn out, began catching hold of her so as to be pulled out with her. But she was a very wicked woman and she began kicking them. "I'm to be pulled out, not you. It's my onion, not yours." As soon as she said that, the onion broke. And the woman fell into the lake, and she is burning there to this day. So the angel wept and went away.

It's a pungent story. Exclusivism. That is the sin of our time. The sin that keeps us in hell is the sin of exclusivist grace, the sin of believing that God helps us but does not help others.

The real proof of grace is that it flows. The real proof of grace is that it flows back out of us and into somebody else!

Our healing comes from Jesus, who simply says, over and over again, "I do choose. Be clean." I do choose, over and over again. I choose for you to be clean, and you and you. And also them and them and them, over and over again.

The real hero in the story of Naaman is the young Israelite servant girl. If anyone had reason to nurture a root of bitterness, it was her. Forced away from her homeland, serving a foreign power, she yet had the grace to point Naaman toward healing.

And with that grace, she became a blessing. The real proof of grace is that it flows.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip