

Trust in Me – Proper 23C

We know from the history of Israel that Elisha inherited the mantle of prophecy and healing from Elijah. But for Elisha to fully prove the spiritual power of Elijah, great things would have to occur. Today we heard about one of them: Naaman, the heroic and revered general of Aram's army has a (potentially, even usually) fatal flaw, he has leprosy. The ancient diseases that our modern word leprosy translates were numerous, not just the bacterial (Hansen's) disease we moderns know as leprosy. But the Levitical Code in the Torah contains precise instructions regulating the stigmatizing treatment of anyone who has a visibly wasting disease, grouped under the name 'leprosy,' and attributable to bad character.

They must be cleansed and renewed and forgiven before they can interact with the rest of society. For us, these stories serve as illustrations, analogies really, of a society's self-care. Even a powerful man like Naaman, if he has severe, debilitating and contagious flaws, must find a way to be healed of them. Otherwise he will lose his status, his position, and his life. Naaman hasn't gotten that bad, but of course he doesn't want to.

Today, we might draw a parallel between this man and current powerful and famous public figures – celebrities, politicians, celebrity-politicians, etc., who wield great power but also have virulent flaws that have resulted in criminal – or reprehensible – behavior, and done considerable damage to others while the big shot's star was ascendant. We know that leprosy is medically manageable, but we are also aware of even uglier pathologies. We know

that abusers of wealth and power who go unchecked do more damage than anybody. But this is not so much a lesson about boundary violations or abuse of power, as it is about how the most powerful among us can be badly flawed. The kind of disease Naaman had was seemingly incurable, progressive and fatal. So it is with today's megalomaniac.

In this tale, the problem is accompanied by its solution. A radical change of attitude and behavior on Naaman's part, specifically, asking for help from someone who has no apparent power or standing, ends up saving him from fatal decline. Elisha's power – as that of all great prophets – is to show Naaman the way.

Goodness knows how many stories in all of our narrative traditions are about characters like this, characters whose lives demonstrate that being powerful and famous doesn't make you happy or good. To quote the Gershwins, "The man who only lives for making money, lives a life that isn't necessarily sunny.

Thus, Naaman: Power, prestige, wealth and pride, but itchy. He's got an itch he just can't scratch. Somehow, Naaman is able to hear the still small voice that tells him, "There is one who can help you." Bear in mind, it can be a far greater challenge for a big shot to hear a little voice than for the rest of us. So his story takes on extra intensity. That he allows the advice of a captive serving girl to affect and guide him is miraculous in and of itself.

Naaman serves a king. And this king is a big king. He's so big that he orders other little kings around. The big king

dashes off a letter to a little king saying, "Take care of my man, Naaman." And Naaman sets off for the little king's kingdom – Samaria -- where the healing is supposed to take place.

What follows are a couple of brief comedy sketches. Storytellers clearly enjoy the discomfort and folly of powerful people. The little king freaks out because he thinks he's being tricked into a quarrel with the big king, who may be looking for an excuse to overthrow him. He doesn't even consider the possibility of trying to help Naaman at first. Then when Naaman hears the treatment that Elisha prescribes as a cure, he has a temper tantrum of his own. "This is stupid! Our rivers are just as good back home; who is this person who orders me to jump in the river seven times!?" But in each case, cooler, humbler heads prevail and the big shots are talked down from their self-righteous – and self-destructive -- ledges. Elisha agrees to look into Naaman's problem, and Naaman's servants calm their master down. They put things into perspective for him and save him from himself: sure enough, into the drink he goes, all leprous and miserable, and out he comes just lovely, ready to audition for Ivory Soap. He is cured.

We don't get a formula, or an explanation of why this big shot is able to hear the small voices that lead to his salvation. We only know that he does listen and, when he listens it makes all the difference in his life. It is the wisdom of the peripheral and powerless that saves the great and powerful. The formula is clear, he becomes able, not only to 'scratch the unscratchable itch,' but remove the itch entirely by humbling himself. When we get to the stories of

Jesus, this reappears as a central theme: God humbling God's self in order to prove the uniquely salvific quality of humility. This is no easy feat for a cat like Naaman.

And Elisha – oh the gall, the chutzpah! He doesn't even come out of his house to see Naaman. He sends a messenger out instead to talk to him. Major diss. "Tell him to go swimming'. Tell Naaman to go jump in the river. But it's just Elisha's way of testing for the presence of humility in the General, for it is at last the humility itself that cleanses, heals and saves him – from the inside out. It must have been something to see this big, powerful guy get down, get naked, get in the river and be transformed. What will it take before the powerful in our culture to follow suit?

His flesh was restored to that of a young boy. Oh the delight of that sense memory – how it feels to kiss the cheeks and tuba the belly of your soft little fellow or lassie. It is a sublime experience to be the kisser of such an one, and the story is reminding us that it is very much a sublime and miraculous state to be that kissable one too. Naaman is made new by his humility; he is made young by virtue of his willingness to be cared for.

He is made new and his priorities change. "Now I know there is no God other than the God of Israel." As the proverb says, "The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, and humility goes before honor." So it is now with Naaman. Fear (as in respect) for God supercedes all other obligations and hierarchies. And only through humility is his new, true honor attained. First things first. If I've got an

itch I can't scratch, go to someone who knows what to do and ask for their advice. And if there aren't any around, find some. Pretty good turnaround for a guy who's used to throwing soldiers and shekels and letters from kings at his problems.

Blessed are the meek, says Jesus, for this very reason. This doesn't mean anything like letting ourselves be doormats or martyrs or pushovers. It does mean putting people in our lives whom we truly admire and trust, and then taking their suggestions once in awhile. Naaman's trusted servants ask him, "If the prophet had asked you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? All he asked you to do was go swimming! Sure, it's a risk. He might be standing there naked, getting in and out of the Jordan seven times and only getting wet. But he takes the risk, humbles himself and gets a lot more than wet, he gets well.

So, Naaman. Able? Yes. Ablest man in all of Aram. Ready? Absolutely. He goes down to Samaria ready for anything, coffers full and highly motivated – sick and tired of having an itch he can't scratch. But is he willing? For the longest time, no. He has too many social, political, financial and professional obligations. He has too many chariots and too much money – too many closets full of clothes. His life is too noisy and busy; he's too wound up. But, but the day does dawn when he is ever so slightly willing, and that makes all the difference. He's ever so slightly willing to take a suggestion from a small voice, to humble himself and just like that he gets his miracle.