

MISSING AN OPPORTUNITY

A Sermon by Thomas R. Henry

St. Pauls United Church of Christ, Chicago

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Text: II Kings 5: 1-14 (included at end of sermon)

Several years ago, I had a couple come to me to talk about their upcoming wedding. They settled into chairs in my office with a bit of the awkwardness that is always there at those first meetings. The woman showed me her beautiful engagement ring and man mentioned how he had proposed. I sat down and had just started to open my mouth to say something when he spoke up quickly saying that he didn't know what I had in mind for the meeting but he thought we might as well get started with something that was critical for him. He then pulled out a sheet of paper. On the paper he had listed eight behaviors that were necessary for his proper treatment. He handed me the piece of paper and said that he wanted me to support him in telling his future wife how he deserved to be treated by her. I never did get that first word out of my mouth! This guy really had a strong sense of self-importance. Kind of like Naaman. Naaman, who had an encounter with the prophet Elisha in the second book of Kings.

Naaman was a 5-star general, or something like that. A hero in his home country. A regular on the celebrity circuit. Except that he had leprosy. A real bummer. Scholars are not in complete agreement over what the malady was that the Bible calls leprosy. It likely was a variety of chronic, sometimes degenerative, skin and nerve conditions, some of which could disfigure a person. In the ancient Hebrew culture it rendered a sufferer as unclean and therefore as an outcast. Our primary images of leprosy are from the old biblical movies that show people hiding their faces and wearing rags and mumbling incoherently, while being shunned by everyone around them. Obviously Naaman was not that bad off, but nevertheless he wanted to get well.

One of his wife's servants knew of a prophet in Samaria who had become legendary for his miraculous works. So, Naaman heads off to Israel with a letter of reference from the king of his country. He takes along a substantial sum of money and other gifts as well. He is prepared to buy his healing, and he shows up at the palace of the King of Israel. Well, the King of Israel is not amused. He thinks the Aramean king is jerking his chain and trying to pick a fight with him by setting him up to fail. He yells, "Does he think I'm God...?" I don't know how to cure a person of illness. What is this?

But the prophet Elisha hears about Naaman and tells the King of Israel to send Naaman to him. "Tell him to come over to my house," says Elisha. So, the very important Naaman heads off to Elisha's house with his entourage of dignitaries, servants, horses and chariots. Naaman definitely has people. And I can see with my mind's eye how Monty Python might stage this scene. Elisha, however, is not properly impressed by all of this. When this very important military personage arrives, Elisha sends out one of his people to tell Naaman to go and wash seven times in the Jordan River and his skin will be made clean.

Well, Naaman is outraged. Elisha has not treated him the way he deserves to be treated. He wants personal attention. Afterall, does Elisha not know how important Naaman is?

“I expected that surely he himself would come out,” says Naaman. Not send some underling. And certainly Naaman does not expect to be told to go and take seven baths in the very dirty Jordan River. The rivers of Damascus in his own country are far better and cleaner, he says. So, he turns his entourage around and rides away.

After I had written this part of the sermon, I read what I had written and realized that the words and phrases I had consciously and sub-consciously chosen to use in telling this story are loaded with judgment. What a pompous, self-important, stubborn guy Naaman is. If I wanted something as badly as Naaman wanted it, I would not be so quick to walk away. Or would I? Maybe I should not be so quick to judge. We all have expectations of life and of other people. We all have open or secret thoughts of what we believe we deserve and how we believe we deserve to be treated. We want people to give us what we need or what we want in the way that we want them to give it to us. Or we might just walk away. Thereby missing an opportunity.

Abba Eban, an accomplished international diplomat, once made a now- infamous statement about neighboring people and nations. He said that “they never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity.” Well, in fact, the “they” he was talking about could actually be “we.” Any one of us. And all of us. Our own country. There’s a little bit of that “they” in individuals and in every nation. How easily we walk away, sometimes in anger and self-righteousness, like Naaman, from opportunities. Opportunities for healing. For reconciliation. For a job. For national security. For financial recovery. For peace.

We can be so like Naaman. And so like the guy in that story that has gone around the internet twenty-five million times. A story I am going to mention again just in case you happen to be the last person on earth who hasn’t heard it.. It’s the one about the man sitting on his rooftop during a flood. He prays to God to save him. And then he sits and waits. Pretty soon a truck comes by with a rescue team. “No, thanks,” says the man, “I’m waiting for God to save me.” The water rises. Then, a man in a rowboat makes the offer of help and gets the same response. The water rises some more. Finally a search helicopter hovers overhead and drops a rope ladder. The man refuses, yelling up to them that he is waiting for God. The water rises over his house and drowns him as he waits. After death, he confronts God about his unanswered prayers, and God says, “But I sent a truck, a boat and a helicopter.”

That’s a silly story. Who would do that? We are smarter than that. Well, sometimes we’re not. Think about it. Have you not waited for some miraculous sign, or some special treatment, before you will let yourself act on some matter? Or let yourself be healed? Or saved from something? And think about the nations of the world as well. How political agendas disguised as national security or patriotic honor can prevent peace. Or even conversation. How arrogance can be called prudence. Because the action required is considered distasteful or demeaning. Like having to take seven baths in a dirty river. How disgusting and embarrassing is that?! Forget it! I’m outa here, said Naaman.

Naaman’s story, and sometimes our very own stories, are powerful illustrations of some eternal words of scripture, like the ones from Isaiah: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your

ways my ways, says the Lord.” And those words from St. Paul: “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom.” Taking a bath in the Jordan River to be cured of leprosy seemed like utter foolishness to Naaman. Demeaning to someone who deserved better. But that is exactly what it took to heal him. Fortunately for Naaman, his people had some sense of God’s foolishness. They got him to halt his hasty exit from Israel. They convinced him to let go of his self-destructive pride and arrogance and to go to the river. He did. And his flesh was restored. His health was restored because he did not walk away and miss an opportunity. On the other hand the young woman at the pre-marital meeting did walk away. Thereby seizing an opportunity!

God’s ways are woven into the structure of creation, and yet people can block their own healing and their own well-being. Nations can throw up impenetrable barriers to their own peace. All because they believe that what is required is distasteful. Or counter to conventional wisdom. Like so many of the teachings and actions of Jesus Christ himself. You know, those things like turn the other cheek and pray for your enemies.

Now, saying this, I also have to say that many of the actions and decisions we are called upon to make for ourselves and others may seem no more clear than the dirty waters of the Jordan River. For whatever reason, God does not always make it crystal clear how to follow God’s ways. I suppose that is why Paul called it God’s foolishness. God’s foolishness, God’s ways, can never be condensed to a formula that can become a best-seller self-help book, but it is pretty safe to say that self-importance and arrogance are major obstacles to walking in God’s ways. And therefore major obstacles to living what truly is the abundant life.

Self-importance may be called self-enrichment or self-enhancement or even self-preservation. It may be called personal pride or patriotism or national security. But watch out! In reality it may be nothing more than a self-destructive pattern of never missing an opportunity to miss and opportunity.

Fortunately for Naaman, he had people who kept him from missing his opportunity. Today we might call those people the church.

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BIBLICAL TEXT FOR SERMON WITH INTRODUCTION

The reading for this Sunday is from the Second Book of Kings. The main characters in this story are Naaman, an Aramean army commander, and Elisha, a Hebrew prophet. The Arameans were a Semitic, nomadic people who spread their Aramaic culture and language throughout the Middle East. At one time Israel was under Aramean rule. Naaman traveled from the area around Damascus, in what is present-day Syria, to Israel, because he had been told that there was a prophet who could cure his leprosy.

II Kings 5: 1-14

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. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." Naaman went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy."

When 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."

But 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."

So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent out a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan River seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." But 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! Are 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. But his servants approached and said to him, "Sir, 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'?" So Naaman 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.