

“Is that all you’ve got?”
II Kings 5:1-14
February 12, 2012

A young woman asked for an appointment with her pastor to talk with him about a besetting sin about which she was worried. When she saw him, she said, "Pastor, I have become aware of a sin in my life which I cannot control. Every time I am at church I begin to look around at the other women, and I realize that I am the prettiest one in the whole congregation. None of the others can compare with my beauty. What can I do about this sin?"

The pastor replied, "Mary, that's not a sin, why that's just a mistake!"

Did you hear about the clever salesman who closed hundreds of sales with this line: "Let me show you something several of your neighbors said you couldn't afford."

Despite the last three and a half years of a sputtering economy, it is still not uncommon to find ourselves or our neighbors trapped in the pride of our success. In fact we still enjoy one of the highest standards of living in the world.

Some years ago, columnist Robert Samuelson claimed that Americans were in a “quest for control,” to manage unpredictable events or destructive social trends. He argued that starting with the victory in WWII we believed we “could create prosperity, eliminate poverty, cure disease, advance social justice, foster racial harmony and ensure global peace.” It almost sounds like a Miss America speech, our attitudes were so rosy.

The idea continued, that “enlightened thinking and rising wealth would confer control over most of the social, economic, and political conditions that might threaten us.”

This notion was evident in everything from the soaring rhetoric of President Kennedy’s Inaugural address and his June 1963 Berlin address, to Martin Luther King’s dream for America and President Reagen’s declaration of morning in America and his demand to have the Berlin wall torn down.

Samuelson went on to argue that such an environment led us to a kind of prideful arrogance as individuals. We were rich, powerful, could get anything we wanted, and eventually, with credit, could have anything we wanted: big cars, big TVs and big houses. Coupled with our national pride, individual pride began to claim that we could conquer anything, the best was always for us, and nothing could stop us, even if there were a few hiccups along the way, such as race riots, youth unrest, Watergate or AIDS or recessions.

We had become as Naaman. He was a general of generals, wealthy beyond belief. He is successful and powerful and mighty and well connected, and possesses everything a heart could desire. There is not one blemish on his record - just thousands of blemishes on his skin. He is a leper. And he wants relief. And his power and might tell him he should be able to get it, after all, he can buy anything he wants, should he not also be able to buy his health?

The well-connected, affluent general, a favorite at court and with the king, taps out all the resources of Syria. In fact the

while Naaman may sense his essence is the power and authority he possesses, his real essence is made known in the stark contrast of the first verse. There the phrase “mighty warrior” is followed by the only passive verb in the sentence, “suffered from leprosy.” Ultimately this otherwise muscular man is undone by illness. From here on the man who normally gives orders to others will struggle to stand on the receiving end of the directives of others.

With all he possesses, he figures he can try anything. So powerful Naaman follows the advice of a slave girl and heads for Israel, a little chagrined, hat in hand, wagon loads of gifts and treasure, a reference letter and a willingness to beg for help.

When he knocks on the king’s door, the king’s own pride and nervousness are at a loss. He and his physicians know no more than the Syrians. Afraid that Naaman’s disappointment might spell doom, the king of Israel tears his clothes in a pitiful Academy Award performance of overacting.

Enter Elisha to save the day. Notice he does not even speak to Naaman himself. Instead he sends an emissary to speak on his behalf. This is not how one treats one so powerful. It drives impetuous Naaman up a wall. Call it, “healthcare runaround” for the bronze age, and it is running thin. No more HMO’s for Naaman; no more forms to fill out. He just wants the treatment.

But when he hears what it is, he wigs out. It seems the final straw. And it is the critical moment in the story. “Is that all you’ve got? Wash in the Jordan? You’ve got to be kidding! I could have

splashed around 7 times 70 times in the waters back home. And that water is better than this!”

He has suffered so long. He has traveled so far, and he is so powerful and rich. At this critical moment of possible healing will he let it all slip away because he is too proud and too arrogant to listen to a slave and a foreigner?

That’s our question as well. When we are really hurting, when we are really struggling, will we listen to anyone with a good suggestion – even those we deem beneath us? Even those whose credentials we do not trust? Remember who got Naaman to Israel in the first place, a prisoner. Now in the midst of his hissy fit that the cure does not measure up to his stature, the same thing. Another servant says to him, “Give it a try. What can it hurt? We’ve come all this way.”

Naaman heeds the servant and did what he was told. And as Buechner described, when he came out, “he could have passed for an ad for Palmolive soap.” He was so grateful he converted on the spot.

You know the problem with our pride and our affluence and our authority and our success, is that they can all lead us on a path away from God. God does ask us to work on our own healing. I don’t mean working out our own salvation, God is still in charge. But like Naaman, or the Jew by the side of the road in the Good Samaritan story, we too need to admit we need God’s help, and to allow that help to come to us. The Jew could have refused, Naaman could have ignored. We need to step forward and repent. We have to step forward and seek baptism, our Confirmands will need

to step forward and affirm their belief. As Naaman went to the prophet, so too, we must meet God, if not halfway, at least along the way.

There is an old illustration that tells of humanity walking away from God, while God stands still. At some point, humanity may pause, turn and start walking back toward God. The point, of course, God has never strayed, we have.

Paul says, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” (Phil. 2¹²)

Naaman works out his own salvation with fear and trembling, as he takes the plunge into the river. The word in Greek for salvation is *soteria*, it means *complete, whole, in harmony and peace*. It is a synonym for the Hebrew *shalom*. In the Christian tradition salvation means the whole person, not just the soul of Greek tradition, but all of who you are.

Naaman found his wholeness in following the prescription of the prophet. Notice the baptismal symbolism here, he enters water, and he comes out whole. He is thoroughly cleansed and redeemed.

Why? Because he went to a place he had never been before, listened to his subordinates who knew better than he did where he could get the help he needed, and agreed to do what God asked him to do to allow God to cleanse him completely. He allowed his true need for healing to overcome his prideful need to be always seen as powerful. He allowed his need for healing to overcome his need to always be in control. He allowed his need for healing to overcome his need to be seen as perfect. Now that's good news.