Luke 17:11-19 Schwartzwald and St. Paul United Church of Christ

2 Kings 5:1-15 October 12, 2025. Kim M. Henning

“From Commander to Servant”

Grace to you and peace from God who comes to us decisively in Jesus of Nazareth. Amen.

Naaman was an army man. Let’s begin there. Years ago the commander of Syria’s army was Naaman. He wasn’t a private; he wasn’t a sergeant. He was commander. With a little imagination you can see his erect body, that pointed jaw, and his no-nonsense face.

On paper Naaman was the number 2 man in Syria just beneath the king. But many would say that Naaman had the power. The king for his survival relied upon the competency of his army and the competency of the army depended upon Naaman.

Naaman was powerful. He had an army, he had money, he had chariots, and he had horses. But there was one other thing he had. Naaman had leprosy. ’The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy.’

It’s ironic. The world throughout history adores power. Naaman was living the dream. But one thing he had no control over. Leprosy. Leprosy was contagious. Leprosy spelled doom and gloom.

But enter an unlikely heroine. At home Naaman and his wife talked about his illness. And who should overhear them but this servant girl who served Naaman’s wife.

This servant girl knew something Naaman’s wife did not know. This servant girl knew something Naaman did not know. She said to her mistress, “If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria. He would cure him.”

I’m not sure why a military man with chutzpah would listen to a servant girl who had no standing at all. But he did. Was it desperation? Was it the crisis of his own mortality?

Naaman was a pagan. Had he never prayed? Had he been so preoccupied with himself and his power and that glamour, that God never so much as ever entered his mind? “Who needs God when I’ve got me,” he probably reasoned until his life was threatened.

A servant girl says, “If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria. He would cure him.” This servant girl was young. Her voice never mattered for much until one day she spoke of a prophet and of God. And she was listened to. While many banter politics and power and sports….. some speak of God. God…

So Naaman set out towards Samaria. The king sent with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. Those treasures would raise the eyebrows of the prophet. Ten talents of silver. Six thousand shekels of gold. Ten sets of garments. With gifts like that anyone would be enticed.

Now Naaman’s entourage of horses and chariots reached Elisha’s hovel. And while neighbors gawked – Elisha never so much as stepped outside. He wasn’t impressed. The psalmist writes, “A king is not saved by his great army, a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might--it cannot save. Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love.”

From inside that hovel Elisha sent a message to Naaman, “Go wash in the Jordan seven times and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.”

Naaman was furious. “You don’t know who you’re speaking to.” Naaman was used to others fawning beneath him. “**I thought for me** Elisha 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!” And then he said, “Are not the rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?”

Naaman was enraged. “That’s no way to treat one like me’. He stomped off. Angry. Our anger says a lot about us. When we express angry, we expect others to pay attention. When we express anger, we expect others to agree. “I’m right, you’re wrong” is what anger says. Naaman was angry and started to stomp away……

Until one of his servants said, “Father, 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 he 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.

Clean. It’s hard to capture the intensity of that moment. One moment he’s facing death, now he’s clean. One moment his life was right near over, now he’s clean. He has a future. Is there anything more beautiful than when we’re given a second chance? One employer says, “You’re fired.” A second, “I need you.” It feels so good. A person says, “I love you” when you know you don’t deserve to be loved. It feels so good. Or when a person says, “I forgive you.”

Now pay attention to what happened after Naaman’s healing. Like the one leper in that Jesus’ story, Naaman goes back to Elisha---‘the man of God.” Naaman gets off his horse. He went to the door and he said with incredible humility, “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from you servant.”

Naaman wants to give Elisha the king’s silver. He wants to give the king’s gold. He wants to give the ten sets of garments. But Elisha refused the gift. “As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing.” A gift is payment, reward. But Elisha refused. “Your healing is a gift of God. Behold God. Not me.

Naaman must have been stunned. Who on earth refuses a gift?

It makes me think of a Saturday night when Fay and I and two others were driving home after a wedding from Minneapolis and the tire on our van goes flat. It’s Saturday night. I must get home. The tire won’t come off. The spare tire place under our van is rusted in place. I’m in my Sunday clothes.

Two hours, maybe three---we were on Highway 29 on the side of the road. We called AAA twice, 3 times. “No sir. A more pressing emergency has arisen.” I start to panic.

It’s getting dark. Hundreds of cars pass us. A car going in the opposite direction on Highway 29 takes the next exit, circles around and pulls up behind us. Two young men jump out, hardly old enough to drive. One goes under the van, hammers/pushes/hammers. The tire drops. The other loosens the lug nuts, removes the tire and puts on the spare. I hand them what I had. Was it $20? $50? No, they said. That’s not why we stopped. Have you ever been treated like that?

Naaman is beside himself. His ego is spent. His control--gone. His anger--gone. Before him stands Elisha who has taken him close to God. Naaman has never come to God or been humbled like that. He says, “If you won’t take my gifts, then let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant.” Isn’t that the best? Naaman wants something from that experience to take home with him into his future. Let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant.”

A conversion happened here. Naaman, a foreigner….Naaman, an army man…… Naaman, a pagan now believes in God. He’s about to go home to Syria. He asks Elisha if he could take a little of Israel with him, two mule loads of earth.

One last thought. In Naaman’s closing speech he twice refers to himself as a servant. The story started with Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria…..The story ended with Naaman, a servant of God. Naaman. Had been full of himself. Ego. Status. Power. An entourage. More money that we can dream of. Now he is a servant.

Can you think of anything more beautiful than being a servant. Jesus said towards the end of his life, “I am among you not to be served but to serveπ. And then he said, “Go and do likewise.”