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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
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2 Kings 5:1-14
The Help We Need

Sometimes help comes from unexpected places: a four-year-old who helped to deliver his baby sister at home; a German man named Schindler who helped hide Jews from the Nazis; and then there's Lily, a lab-mix rescued from the side of the road in Burlington, Iowa who has been nursing a litter of kittens found without their mother. (You can see her story on You Tube). And in our text for today, a slave girl helps her captor, servants help their master, Elisha helps a non-believer; and the God of Israel helps the commander of the enemy army. It's a miracle of old that we claim for our day too – when enemies act like friends, if even for a moment.

Our text for today tells us the miraculous story of the cast of unlikely characters who rally in help of Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram – who has a terrible skin disease. This great and powerful warrior now has leprosy, or something quite like it. He is only a shadow of his former self: politically, socially, and physically. While the first irony of this story may be just that, that the great and powerful one now weakened and afflicted; the second irony is certainly this: that a girl captured during one of the Aramean raids on the Northern Kingdom of Israel who is now the slave of Naaman's wife, is the initiator of healing for her captor. This unnamed girl now immortalized in three verses of scripture tells her mistress of the prophet from Samaria who, she knows, has the ability to heal such un-healable diseases.

This unnamed voice is heard, and even the king of Aram supports Naaman's quest for healing from this Israelite prophet.

The next surprising helper to Naaman is the king of Aram himself. Sure, we might acknowledge that he has the most to gain in this situation, second only to Naaman himself. A healing would result in the king getting his top man back. But the king enters into tricky territory on Naaman's behalf, initiating conversation with the king of Israel during a time of fragile peace and emptying his bank account to lavish gifts upon the king and the prophet. His extension of mercy backfires – **it seems that only the weak can help the strong in this story** – and the King of Israel becomes afraid, thinking that the King of Aram is asking him to do the impossible task of healing his commander.

Enter Elisha – the prophet who followed Elijah – who steps up and invites Naaman to come to him for healing. But when Naaman shows up at his doorstep, Elisha doesn't even appear to look into the situation. In stead he sends a messenger to Naaman with the simple instruction to wash in the Jordan seven times to be healed.

This reply does not sit well with Naaman who expects more fanfare from those caring for him. He is offended that he came all this way and was shown no respect for his position or his authority. He is ready to turn back. But his own *servants* persuade him to try these baths in the Jordan – and with God's help he is healed.

Yes, our story is a powerful testimony to the universality of God's redemptive love. We read of God's mercy extending beyond the boundaries of the kingdom of Israel as God heals the outsider, bringing wholeness to Israel's enemy. Even Jesus notes this remarkable demonstration of God's favor, when, in Luke's gospel, he points out that "there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed – only Naaman the Syrian."¹ Frankly God's mercy toward Naaman is quite remarkable, and perhaps inexplicable. Maybe God is trying to assert who is truly the most powerful in the land. Or maybe God is trying to set the record straight about just what kind of power is strong – the power to overcome the boundaries and wounds of war, the power to heal not only physical bodies but to heal the wounds of pride and the wounds of social isolation.

But there is something about Naaman that seems to evoke everyone's sympathy. There's something about his story that reminds us that even this great warrior, even this military commander, is *simply human*. **Something about his need for help takes him from the elevated status of his rank and office and makes him just one of the guys – any ordinary person, just like one of us.** His brokenness, his illness makes him relatable to us, for regardless of our status in this world, we all have known injury or illness. We have all at one time carried with us the need for healing – from addiction or isolation; from a torn rotator cuff or from cancer; from our grief, loneliness, waning self esteem, confusion. We may, like Naaman, need deliverance not only from the physical wounds we carry on the outside, but from the distractions that hinder

¹ Luke 4:27

us: our pride or greed; our trumped up sense of self-reliance; our assertions that we are alone on the world.

What's more, our need for help and healing transcends the individual and roots itself in the communal. Barbara Brown Taylor writes this in a sermon published in 1999 – two years before 9/11, nearly three years before the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, before the "Great Recession" and the crash of the housing market. She writes:

*One of the most peculiar things about America, it seems to me, is that we have so much freedom and are still so unwell. As a nation we are strong, but we are not particularly healthy. Our families, our schools, our cities, and our political systems are all showing signs of disease. Beefed up on steroids of wealth and power, we look pretty good from the outside, but the truth is that inside we are feeling a little shaky.*²

We have all, like Naaman, felt a little shaky. We have all done our best to make it through the day when our strength has failed us, our pride has been wounded, or when we have gone from top dog to underdog. We have needed healing – we may today need healing. As individuals, as a church, or as a nation, we have cried out for help, looking for answers, searching for healing in even the most unexpected of places. Wholeness is that for which we hunger, for which we long.

² Taylor, Barbara Brown. "The Cheap Cure" in *Home Another Way*. P 158.

We pray: for a peaceful end to war so our troops can return home to their families; for economic recovery and the creation of new jobs; for the bi-partisan divide to narrow so that we have the knowledge that our government is representing us and not the special interest groups that fund their campaigns. We pray for our kids to find peaceful solutions to conflict, to be safe on our streets, to be free from illness or bullying. We pray for our neighbor or friend to be healed from depression or addiction, from cancer or from the abusive relationship they are in. We cry out for healing.

We gather as a people who worship a God of wholeness – a God whose love for us that is so strong that this God put on our brokenness, entered into our pain, so that we might be freed – Yes, FREED! – to new life. We might not see the fullness of this promise in this life, but we work toward this kingdom vision as we hope for the fulfillment of this promise in the life yet to come.

As we celebrate the independence of our nation and remember those who have gone before us so that we might be free to vote, free to speak, free to worship the God of our salvation, we pray for continued freedom. We pray that we, and citizens of all nations, may go to sleep at night without the threat of terror or harm. We pray that we, and all people might have access to medical care that will offer the opportunity for freedom from physical ailment. We pray that...

If we keep on reading, we learn that Naaman does worship the one true God. But what if the story continued...what if the one who was freed from the bondage of illness through the power of God's mercy, extended God's mercy to another. What if Naaman went back to the young girl

who was his captive and said thank you to her for initiating his path to wholeness. And what if he then, set her free.