

“Not On Our Terms” 7-7-19
2 Kings 5:1-14, Galatians 6:1-16

Do you know somebody who seems to “have it all”? Makes straight A’s in school, *and* is popular, *and* is great-looking, *and* athletic, *and* talented, *and* wealthy, *and* has the best girlfriend or boyfriend or spouse. Do you know people like that? Don’t you hate ‘em?

Just kidding.

Naaman is one of those people. He’s the commander of the King of Aram’s army. This guy’s a five-star general with so many medals on the front of his uniform he’s in danger of toppling over. Scripture says Naaman’s “a great man.” The king loves him, because he wins battles all the time. Oh, and did I mention? Naaman’s rich. So let’s just say it. You want to be Naaman.

Except. Except there is this one thing. There is this one problem, one chink in Naaman’s armor. He has leprosy.

Now the word leprosy is used to designate various types of skin diseases of the time. So we don’t know how serious Naaman’s leprosy is. Is it Hansen’s disease, a dangerous form of skin disease that can also

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damage other parts of the body? Or is it something less dangerous, something that is more of an irritant? We don't know. But we know that Naaman has leprosy, and though he is "a great man," a powerful, popular, and wealthy man, he cannot cure himself.

Now on one of their many "winning" raids, the Arameans had captured a young girl from Israel. And she had been made the servant of Naaman's wife. Now you would think this little girl would "know her place" and keep quiet around such *superior* people as Naaman and his wife. But not so much. She says to her mistress, "If only my lord went to see the prophet in Samaria. He'd cure his leprosy." If only Naaman would check in with one of God's prophets.

And for some reason (desperation about his situation or the girl's confidence, we don't know) but for some reason Naaman takes the girl seriously. He goes to his boss, the king, and shares the girl's comments. And for some reason (who knows why?) the king also takes the girl seriously. Not a bad reminder that sometimes God speaks through unlikely people, children from another country even.

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The king says, “Okay. Go, and I’ll send along a letter of reference to the king of Israel.” So Naaman goes and takes the royal reference letter with him, and not the letter only, but he also takes “ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments.” Basically, we’re talking rock star money and outfits here.

So Naaman pulls up outside the king of Israel’s house with his boatload of cash and clothes and royal letter of reference. And it’s so impressive that the king of Israel is suspicious. He thinks it’s a plot somehow to get him stuck in a war by giving him an assignment (curing leprosy) that he cannot complete. So the king of Israel tears his clothes in grief.

Fortunately, the prophet Elisha (the person the little girl had actually told them to visit) hears about the situation and says, “Send Naaman to me so he’ll learn there’s a prophet in Israel.”

So Naaman and company head out again. And with all Naaman’s horses and chariots and money and clothes they pull up outside the entrance to Elisha’s little house. And notice what Elisha does. He sends

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a messenger out who says, “Go, wash in the Jordan River seven times, and your flesh will be restored, and you’ll be clean.”

It’s like one of those “Easy Buttons” at the office supply chain Staples. Just push the Easy Button and your wish is granted. Just wash in the Jordan River seven times, and you’ll be clean. Simple, easy, right?

But here’s where things get even stranger. You’d think that Naaman would gallop down to the Jordan as fast as his horse and chariot could take him. But no. Naaman is furious and he whines about how he’s been treated. “I thought Elisha would come out and stand in front of me, call on the name of his Lord, wave his hand over the leprosy spot, and cure it. That’s what I thought. Besides, aren’t the Abana and Pharpar rivers better than the Jordan? Couldn’t I wash in them and be made clean?” And Naaman goes stomping off.

And now we begin to see that Naaman’s real problem is more than skin deep. His real hindrance is not a condition cured by having Elisha wave his hand over a spot on skin, or having him wash in a river, or take an antibiotic, or push an Easy Button. No. Naaman’s real problem is inside, underneath the surface. His real problem is his arrogance. Rather

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than gratefully accept a gift, he wants to set the terms for his healing. Rather than consent to receiving a present from God, he would rather stick his lip out and complain.

Writing to the Galatian church, the Apostle Paul points out similar problems to the Christians there. First, the Galatians have gotten caught up in the notion that their obedience to law will establish right relationship with God. They're attracted to the idea that, yes, God's love and forgiveness come through Jesus Christ, but we also need to obey the law in order to receive that love and forgiveness. And for guys at least, that means being circumcised.

Well, as you may know, Paul is not amused. In fact, in Galatians 5:12 he says he hopes the people who're teaching this circumcision nonsense will castrate themselves.

But Paul's heart is in the right place, because he sees the arrogance and danger of this teaching. Instead of fully trusting and accepting the gift of God's love in the crucified and resurrected Christ, some of the Galatian Christians are insisting that God's love must be earned, not received as a gift. So Christians who rely on obedience to the law

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(including circumcision) can then be proud and brag about themselves.

“Look at us! We’re so faithful, and you’re not!” And Christians who rely on obedience to the law for right relationship with God essentially are rejecting God’s perfect gift of Christ and substituting their own flawed and inadequate righteousness. This is the Galatians first problem related to arrogance. There is a second problem.

Paul knows that Christians are called to live obedient lives as a thankful response to God’s freely given love. But we sometimes fail at this thankful response, sometimes in spectacular fashion. So what should the church do when people sin? Just ignore it? Just say, “Oh well. We’re only human. Who cares?” Nope.

Instead, Paul says we are to restore the person to community with “a spirit of gentleness” *and* we are to “take care” that we ourselves are not tempted. Notice Paul does not want to attack a member of the community or get even or punish. Paul wants to restore relationship, and he is concerned that the people trying to help the person don’t become arrogant in the process.

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Naaman struggles with his pride. And the Galatian church struggles with the same issue. In both cases, the people want to set their own terms for dealing with God and each other, instead of realizing that God sets the terms. What's needed in both cases is humility. Have you noticed how often the need for humility comes up in the Bible? Why is it mentioned so often?

In the 1987 movie "Broadcast News" Holly Hunter plays a brilliant, but difficult and tormented television news producer. In the early minutes of the movie, we catch glimpses of her anxious and perfection-driven childhood. Later, as an adult, in one scene in the movie, she has a furious argument with her boss about who will anchor a live breaking news event about an airstrike. Hunter is insistent and furious that she must get her way. And finally her exasperated boss says, "It must be nice to always believe you know better, to always think you're the smartest person in the room." "No," she answers, her voice full of anguish, her eyes starting to tear up. "It's awful."

Arrogance offers much on the surface, but underneath the skin is a terrible burden. Arrogance props us up as imagined stars before God's

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gaze and earners of God's blessings and love. But humility unites people as fellow sinners who face God's judgment and depend upon God's mercy in Christ.

Arrogance separates some people as "deserving" of decent lives from other people who do not deserve decent lives. Arrogance separates and dehumanizes. But humility reminds us that all of God's children deserve to have decent lives simply because God loves all people the same. All.

As you know, in recent days we have heard ever more troubling reports of the treatment of undocumented immigrants, especially children, at our southern border. Children sleeping on concrete floors. No soap. No toothbrushes. No diapers. Sickness untreated. Death. Small children caring for babies. People drinking from toilets. A lawyer for our government arguing before a judge that soap, toothbrushes, and diapers are not essential.

Nobody is arguing for open borders. And other administrations certainly have nothing to brag about when it comes to treatment of undocumented immigrants. But the level of intentional cruelty here is

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disgraceful. These are children of God, and God will hold us accountable for their treatment. Let us demand that our elected representatives find constructive solutions.

Arrogance says, “We will continue to make life as miserable for them as possible, so that they will not try to come to our country.” But humility says, “These children of God are fleeing violence and extreme poverty in their countries. Instead of treating them with more cruelty, we will be kind to them. And our country will reach out to their countries with funding and food and ways to bring stability.” As the Apostle Paul says, “Bear one another’s burdens.” “Let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up.” And as he also says, “Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.”

Let us bear one another’s burdens. And let us sow humility, not arrogance, love, not hatred. Let us be the church of Jesus Christ we are meant to be--God’s healing, cleansing love on earth. Let us not grow weary in doing what is right. Let us not give up. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal