

Surprised by Service

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

October 16, 2022 – Sunday Morning Worship

Text: 2 Kings 5:1-15

The story of Naaman which we heard just a few minutes ago is one of the more unusual healing stories in the Bible. It's also one of my favorites, but you've heard me say that many times before. It's true because I do truly love the Bible. I always have. It is a remarkable collection of writings and stories spanning thousands of years which form the foundation for three of the world's great religions. But the Bible is even more than that. It is the written record of one thing – humankind's unending quest to better understand the connection, the relationship, between God and humans, between the divine and the mundane, between the sacred and the profane. Nowhere is that more evident than in this remarkable story of the healing of Naaman.

Why is that? What does this story reveal to us about God? About humanity? About the interactions and the connections between the two? To consider these questions we first have to understand who Naaman is. As the text states, he was the commander of the army of the King of Aram. To offer some geographic and historical perspective, Aram corresponds roughly to the territory of present day Syria. Aram was an enemy of Israel and their armies had already fought several battles. At the time of this story, there was an uneasy peace between the two nations. Naaman, as a great military leader, was a most valuable asset to the King of Aram so it is understandable that the King would want him to remain in the best of health. Naaman was suffering from what the text calls leprosy. Since this was a term used for any sort of skin disease, it could have been what we know today as leprosy

but, since Naaman does not seem to have been quarantined from others, it was most likely some other form of noncontagious skin disease, like eczema. Still, Naaman was most likely very uncomfortable and undoubtedly embarrassed by such a distressing condition. He was upset enough about it that he was willing to listen to the advice of a young slave girl in his own household. This was his wife's servant girl taken captive in one of the recent skirmishes with Israel. After her capture, she was put into service in Naaman's household. It was this young girl who told her mistress that she knew of a healer in Samaria, the capital city of the northern kingdom of Israel, who could heal Naaman. Soon Naaman was on his way to tell his king of this healer and his king decided to get in touch with the King of Israel. Not wanting to waste any time, he just sent Naaman to the King of Israel with a letter and all kinds of riches as payment for the healing being requested.

Upon Naaman's arrival in Samaria, the King of Israel freaks out because he has no idea how to cure Naaman, knowing not to do so would cause real problems with his counterpart in Aram. Elisha, the prophet, heard of the dilemma and showed up to see the King of Israel, urging him to send Naaman on to him. The king did and before long Naaman arrived outside Elisha's house with his full entourage. But Elisha does not come out. Instead, he sends a message out to Naaman to go and dip himself in the Jordan River seven times and then he will be healed. Naaman is not happy. In fact, he's furious. If dipping himself into a river was all it took for a healing, he had passed two rivers on his journey from Aram! No, he expected something much grander

and more dramatic from this prophet Elisha. So, he stormed off, but not too far.

What's really interesting here is that Naaman does eventually do as Elisha tells him to and he is healed. But not because Elisha came back out, apologized, and coaxed him to the Jordan. No, the ones who did the coaxing were Naaman's own servants, part of that big entourage of folks following him everywhere. And what they said to convince him was brilliant. They said, "if the prophet had told you to do something difficult, you would have done it without thinking. But because this seems so simple, you are reluctant to even try." So, Naaman went down to the Jordan – some distance from Elisha's house – and dipped himself in the water seven times. And, on the seventh time he emerged fully healed from his skin disease. He was thrilled and so was everyone else! Once again God, acting through God's faithful people, had accomplished the miraculous through a seemingly impossible way.

One of the incredible things about this particular story is how many different lessons it illustrates for us and for anyone seeking to understand how faith works. One obvious lesson to be drawn is that healing takes faith. Second, is the idea that healing can come in surprising ways and often God acts in ways that can seem on the surface to make no sense. This story also illustrates one of the first times when it was made clear that God was not limited by human boundaries like political nation states. After all, Aram and Israel were enemies but God reached out to heal a military leader of Aram anyway. That point would have really stood out to folks during Elisha's time.

Today, I want us to look at a different aspect of this story. I want us to look at how many people were involved in this entire process of Naaman's healing. Let's count. Tell me who you remember: *(pause for responses)*

The captive servant girl from Israel

The Aramean soldiers who captured her – let's say 4

Naaman's wife

Naaman himself

The King of Aram

The King of Aram's scribe who wrote the letter

The King of Aram's entourage, at least 5 courtiers

Naaman's entourage – at least 5 soldiers, possibly more

The King of Israel's entourage – at least 5 courtiers

Elisha's servant

Elisha himself

Naaman's two servants

So how many is that? 28 by my count. It took 28 people for Naaman's healing to happen! Surprising, isn't it? Usually when we consider this story, we only think about 2 people – Naaman and Elisha. Maybe the two kings and the two servants who convince Naaman. But still, it's really 28. That is a lot of people for one healing which itself probably took 10 minutes at most.

28 people, visible and invisible, in this story were needed to accomplish the goal of healing Naaman. What does this tell us? Something pretty basic actually. It tells us that God needs us – you and me – to do what God needs done in the world each day. That, dear ones, is a simple yet profound truth and it is also one we so frequently leapfrog right over as we make our way through our too busy and fraught lives. And it has ever been thus. St.

Teresa of Avila, a Spanish nun and mystic living in the 16th century and one of the few women named as a “doctor” of the Roman Catholic Church, wrote this famous poem on this very subject:

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which He looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are His body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours. ¹

Christ has no body now on earth but yours. But ours! You and me right here in this church. Wow, that’s a humbling thought ... and a scary one.

But is it, really? Humbling, yes, of course! To walk in Christ’s footsteps, approach the world each day as Jesus would have us do – now that is scary ... and overwhelming ... and seemingly impossible. The thing is though, it’s none of those things. Not really. What it is, dear ones, is our call – individually as persons of faith and collectively as the church. We are called to be as Christ to all we meet. Will we succeed all the time? Of course not! No human is capable of such a thing. We are NOT Jesus, any of us. But we are God’s beloved, called by Jesus to share God’s love with everyone we encounter. Aah – now that does sound scary! Sharing God’s love with everyone? “I’m not buttonholing people for Jesus,” we push back. I’m not going

¹ <https://catholic-link.org/quotes/st-teresa-of-avila-quote-christ-has-no-body-but-yours/>

around shouting to people that I am a Christian and they need to be too! Of course not. And that is not the best way to tell people about Jesus anyway. Anyone can say words that talk about Jesus and, you know and I know, words are quickly forgotten. What really makes the difference is revealing Jesus through how we act with each other and with the broader community – actually with everyone we encounter every day.

I know, I know – even that sounds overwhelming. But, dear ones, it's not. The folks of this church do it all the time without thinking. It's just who you are. It's who we are. Case in point: Yesterday. These beautiful flowers on the altar are here to celebrate the life of one of our own dear friends and long time member of this church, Judy Bartlett. Judy's service was here yesterday and many of you here this morning *were* Jesus' hands and feet to her grieving family and friends in that moment when they were buried in sadness and deep grief. Many of the ladies of the church came in over a two day span of time to set up Fellowship Hall for the reception.

You carefully arranged the tables and made arrangements for food so the family could enjoy visiting with the friends who had come to mourn their mom and grandmother with them. You went to extraordinary lengths to express your love of Judy by every little thing you did. Putting out the linen tablecloths, place settings on every table, cookies and goodies of every type with "to go" boxes packed up for family members as the reception drew to a close. But the truly extraordinary thing you did, the Jesus' hands and feet thing you did, was for each of you to bring a special bouquet of flowers and a card for the family. For those of you who weren't here yesterday, our ladies each brought bouquets for each

of the tables carefully prepared for the family to rest as they greeted friends and family. Garden bouquets, elegant floral arrangements, event potted mums made our Hall look incredibly warm and inviting. Your efforts proclaimed to Judy's family – "we're here, we care, we want to take care of you."

Let me assure you that you accomplished your goal. At one point, all the tables were full as people ate and talked and reconnected and talked about Judy. People left after an hour or so changed by the love and compassion they experienced here in such a sad moment. They left restored. They left with healing from this loss beginning. And you ladies made that happen. That is a very Jesus thing to do. That is what it means to be Jesus' hands and feet. You did it and you did it without hesitation, without realizing what you were doing. But dear ones, you did it. And lives were changed.

Our stewardship campaign kicks off this Sunday. For those of you unfamiliar with that term, stewardship "season" as we call it, is the time when we as a congregation reflect together on how it is we support the church. We remind ourselves that each of us supports the church, as best as we are able, through the sharing of our resources, our time, talent and treasure, with the church so that the church is here and remains vital and active in its call to be Jesus' hands and feet in our own lives and in the community outside our doors. This morning you heard a Stewardship moment about the people resources of the church – the paid staff and all the volunteers who make the church happen – literally. Without the people here, this church is just a building. Without the giving of time and the sharing of our talents in so many different ways, the church simply ceases to exist. It has ever been

thus. People – you and me – are the reason faith lives on from generation to generation. People are the hands and feet of God, often without even knowing it – like we heard this morning in all those people it took to accomplish Naaman’s healing. Remember, it took 28 people to make a transformative difference in one man’s life. God needs people to do God’s work! We as Christians, we are truly the hands and feet of Jesus, just as St. Teresa of Avila wrote five centuries ago. That is our call. That is our challenge from God every day. That is who we are meant to be. The question for you, then, can be only one – how will you answer? Amen.