

January 21, 2018

Crossroads United Church of Christ

Text: II Kings 5 The story of Naaman and the Israeli Slave Girl

Lies

Lying to the young is wrong.
Proving to them that lies are true is wrong.
Telling them
that God's in his heaven
and all's well with the world
is wrong.
They know what you mean.
They are people too.
Tell them the difficulties
can't be counted,
and let them see
not only
what will be
but see
with clarity
these present times.
Say obstacles exist they must encounter,
sorrow comes,
hardship happens.
The hell with it.
Who never knew
the price of happiness
will not be happy.
Forgive no error
you recognize,
it will repeat itself,
a hundredfold
and afterward
our pupils
will not forgive in us
what we forgave.

A Poem by the Russian Poet, Yevtoshenko in the 1960s which I have treasured since I first read it many years ago. I have tried to let this poem inform my teaching ever since.

In case you haven't realized it we are living in an age of lies, extreme lies. The truth has taken leave of our everyday lives. We have lies coming at us from all directions, so that it is hard to tell lies from truth. Our former sources for truth have dried up or become corrupt or discredited. Lies are shaking the very foundations of our democracy and of our world.

So after reading the story of Naaman and the slave girl in the High School Sunday School class last fall, thanks to Sarah Moews calling our attention to it, I began to realize that this story had something to help us through this current time. So I thought, for my own sake, I should preach a sermon working with this text. I have read and reread this story, and each time more and more meaning for me emerged. It showed me again that there is indeed yet more light and truth that can and does emerge from the scriptures if we just pay attention.

Let's first take a look at the story which the students acted out for us in November and Sarah just read to us again to refresh our memories.

First this is a self-contained story, one chapter in length, about an event that happened approximately 3000 years ago. First, undoubtedly as an oral story passed down from one story teller to another and then finally written down. And this brings us to our first question: why was this story preserved? It must have had some importance to someone. It must have mattered. That also suggests that maybe it has some importance for us today.

Secondly the story is told with just the bare facts. Characters are not developed. The plot doesn't answer some obvious questions. When I wrote the play I filled in some of the story so it would make sense. I think it would get a C- in an English class at Simpson.

Here we have a slave girl, a nameless girl, who does a simple deed but under extraordinary circumstances. One can imagine, but we don't know for sure, she was taken by force by the Syrian army on one of its successful raids into Israeli territory. She was taken from her parents who loved her very much. I cannot imagine the anguish she and her family suffered. She was alone, scared, without protection. She was stolen, made into a slave, taken without hope to a foreign land by a sworn enemy of Israel. She must have been scared out of her wits. She ends up as the handmaiden to Naaman's wife. She must be suffering from Post

Tramatic Stress Syndrome of the worst kind. And we have no inkling of what happened to her. There is no happy ending. But because Sarah moews called our attention this story, it continues in the life at least of this church. The end of this story hasn't happened yet.

The slave girl, [I wish she had a name I could call her by name] becomes aware that Naaman has Leprosy, first by his whitish appearance and then later through talking with her mistress. Her expected response would be to wish that he would die in retribution for the horrible ordeal he was putting her and her family, through. But instead she reacts with kindness and love. Does this remind you of a command from Jesus: Love your enemies? She instead gives him information that will cure him, that will save his life. That is remarkable! I think she must have had extraordinary parents who taught her to be kind to strangers, to repay evil with goodness, to have pity on those less fortunate than her, indeed, to love her enemies. She did not withhold the good news of a possible cure from her captor. And there were no conditions, no charge, no promises for this life saving information. This was a gift from her to Naaman not a transaction.

After Naaman is cured, he proclaims that he now knows that "there is no God in all the earth except in Israel". Naaman had appealed to the Syrian gods for a cure

and there was no answer. The difference here for Naaman is that this God of Israel can actually do things like cure leprosy. The difference between the God of Israel and the gods of Syria is that one is dead and the other is the Living God. A living God is a lot more helpful than a dead God. Idols are dead, not moving, silent, impermanent. They rot or crack or break. You can't interact with the idols. You talk to them and they just stare back. They do not cure Leprosy.

This is a big deal. A living God is a new idea of how a God can be. There are many examples of humans interacting with this God. There are times when human interaction actually changes God's mind. It is almost as if this God likes to engage humans in debate. My favorite story is the one where Jacob wrestles with God to demand a blessing. Naaman is impressed by the Israelite God because he got healed. God spoke back to him in the healing of his leprosy. The gods of Syria never did that.

Most commentators on this passage stop at this point with this story. They seem to like the idea that a heathen like Naaman can be convinced by experiences like this, to believe in the Israelite God. Christians like this stopping point also because it validates that "my God is better than your God". Or to put it into contemporary language "My Button is bigger than your button". Or see, you have

to believe in my interpretation of who God is. I don't have to change but you do.

A familiar story.

This story, however, has a part two that I have come to believe you need to wrestle with to get out of this story what God, a living God, intends for us to hear.

There is more to this story.

And part 2 is the story of Gehazi, the servant of Elisha. Elisha is the prophet who succeeded Elijah. He is a wise and grounded man, who refuses the gifts of Naaman for his miraculous cure because Elisha know who really did the healing, and it wasn't him. It also means that Elisha does not think of the curing of leprosy as a transaction requiring payment.

But Gehazi sees not the miracle here but an opportunity to get some money. He thinks to himself. "My master has let that Aramean Naaman off too lightly by not accepting from him what he offered. As the Lord lives, I will run after him and get something out of him". This is blasphemy because Gehazi's action is not because "the Lord lives", it is because Gehazi sees an opportunity to increase his wealth.

I am currently reading a book by Andy Crouch, the executive editor of *Christianity Today* entitled "Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power". He was one of the few evangelicals who saw clearly the tragedy of the last election and he tried very

hard, in the time leading up to the election, to warn evangelicals of the false god they were following in supporting Trump.

In this book Crouch debunks Lord Acton's famous dictum: "Power tend to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely". This is famous because it does capture something which is important and true. This is how we often think of power.

Mostly power is used in what is called a zero-sum game. If I get more power you must lose some power. We see this idea all the time. Donors to campaigns expect something in return, in most case favors which result in an increase in their wealth.

In most of the Westerns, somewhere a sheriff says to an outlaw. " This town is too small for the both of us. It is either me or you." The guns come out and somebody dies.

But teaching is another thing. When I teach I impart to my students the skill and tools to understand chemistry until they are able to use chemistry to solve some nagging problem and something different happens. This activity does not diminish my skill or capacity, or power to do chemistry. It actually increases it. But it also increases the power of the student to use chemistry. This is what is called a positive sum transaction. The amount of power to do chemistry is not

the same, it has now multiplied. It has flourished. And since teaching is the best way of learning, my own power to understand chemistry has increased as has the student's power. This is a win-win situation, a flourishing of power.

The Israeli slave girl has lost nothing in sharing her knowledge of a leprosy cure with Naaman. Power was used here for flourishing not for dominion. In fact the slave girl has gained confidence and experience for telling somebody who has Leprosy about a way to be cured again and helping another victim of leprosy.

Now there is still the problem of Gehazi. He is still practicing the old zero sum game. He gets some gold and silver and Naaman has less. And Gehazi uses lying and deceit to carry out his plan to get something out of Naaman. In our day this kind of action is often characterized as "just good business". If some questionable practice increases the bottom line by decreasing somebody's power, so what? It is seen as justified because it is a smart business practice. And some CEO gets paid more. In the end, however, all the CEO gets is more money. Nothing more. Why do you think the wealthy demanded a tax cut even though that means that the US would have to borrow money to do it and that the majority of the people opposed such tax reform?

That is the way idolatry works. Idols demand more and more of the idolator and the idolator gets less and less. It is the exact opposite of what you get from the living God. The peace that passes all understanding, for example.

Elisha is wise enough to see through Gehazi's ruse. And he confronts Gehazi with his lies and deceit. I imagine Elisha is very disappointed by his servant whom he has chosen and trained and instructed. And did not Gehazi learn anything from Elisha? What went wrong here?

The last part of the story answers that. Gehazi pays a terrible price for his zero sum game. He contracts leprosy from Naaman. That would seem to be punishment enough. But it is apparently not. The curse of leprosy will be inflicted on all of Gehazi's children and grandchildren and great grand children, FOREVER. That seems a bit much. They all did not lie and follow the idol of wealth. Why then do they suffer the same fate. They did not choose to be born into Gehazi's family. This is not fair.

This simply describes what happens when somebody lies. It gets passed on to our children. I doesn't stop unless there is repentance and a turn to the right. This requires wisdom to realize the damage our actions have caused, and the

realization of how our actions, reverberate throughout the universe through our children and grandchildren forever.

That is because this is not a punishment for this sin. It is not from the living God. It is us who pass on this curse. Our children, my students, indeed everyone with whom we have contact learns from us directly or indirectly. Especially when we try and teach our children our values.

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Do you ever see colors in letters. I do and have from when I was young. A is red of course, B is yellow L is green, a light green, M is a dark blue, N is a light blue, etc. In this story from ancient times preserved in the Bible, the word of the living God, we have seen two people, both white. Gehazi is white, a dirty white, a stained white. That white does not radiate out into the world so that other may see clearly the world as it is. It is a white that hides the truth. It is a white that diminishes our ability to differentiate an idol from the living God. We follow idols who promise greatness. We easily lose our way. We mistake the evil for good. We are blinded , lies for truth.

The Israeli slave girl is also white because from her radiates a light so pure and so powerful that it illuminates the darkest corners of the world. With that light we can see clearly the world as it is and how it could be. Her light illuminates clearly, showing us the path we should take away from lies into truth, away from the idols that enslave us. Her light show us the path to the Living God.

And now I understand why this story was preserved some 3,000 years. It is a story for us in this time and place. There is yet more light and truth that breaks forth from the word of God. Thanks be to the Living God. Amen

God's Gift to Us by James Marshall

Benediction

Go into the week ahead with courage, and with joy.
Trust in God, and wait patiently for God to act.
For God is good to all who seek;
and God's loving presence goes with us
everyday, everywhere.

This service is ended, Go in Peace

The benediction hymn is # in the