

God Isn't Fair  
II Kings 5:1-14 (19)

Well, isn't that a grand story. It's so heart-warming, exactly what we progressive churchgoers like to hear. It's got all the right elements. There is a powerful leader - an enemy even - who listens to the voice of a marginalized, oppressed class (a woman's voice no less!). Even listens to those voices more than once. And in doing so finds healing and grace and goes off to preach the wideness of God's mercy. It's so New Testament!

And let's not underestimate how difficult it is finding a good New Testament story in the Old Testament - particularly in this part of the Old Testament. Kings and Chronicles are gruesome, grim tales after King David's reign - during the division of the Kingdom of the Chosen People. The country - besieged by stronger neighbors - is weakened by internal disagreements and conflicts resulting in the country being split into two, the Northern Kingdom, Israel and the Southern Kingdom, Judah.

For both kingdoms, these historical books of the Bible are accounts of poor leadership, poor politics, and poor obedience to God's recommendations for being king of a successful kingdom. Which basically boils down to only two recommendations:

- 1) don't worship any other gods and
- 2) follow the ritual laws.

Instead of obedience to God, there is bloody battle after battle; overthrow after overthrow; a good king who dies too young, or has weak kids, and is followed by three or four bad kings; there is scheming and plotting galore.

So, our Scripture this morning, this story of redemption and healing is a little ray of light in an otherwise dreary set of tales.

Naaman is a General in the army of a king who is one of those "stronger neighbors" constantly knocking on Israel's door. Despite his great title and skill, he has leprosy or possibly some other sort of skin disease.

One of his wife's slaves, a young Israeli girl, mentions that there is a man of God who could heal him and so at some point, Naaman finds himself journeying to Elisha accompanied by a letter from his king to the King of Israel, an entourage of servants and quite the bank of silver and gold. The king of Israel smells politics and gets all melodramatic and Elisha has to calm him down saying, "What better way to show our strength than to prove that there is a prophet here."

So Naaman shows up at Elisha's door and Elisha sends out some minor lackey to the General telling him to go wash in the Jordan. Which of course annoys Naaman to no end. Aren't the rivers in his country good enough?! Can't this guy even come out in person to wave his hands over me and call on his God?! Enraged, he turns away.

His servants - being the voices of reason and calm - say what difference does it make if Elisha said it in person or not. This action seems so silly, so easy ... what could be the harm in giving it a try? And so Naaman goes to the Jordan and washes himself clean.

Thrilled, he comes back and not only acknowledges that there is no other God in the world except the Israelite's God, and he offers gifts - which Elisha refuses. Naaman leaves, promising to give up his burnt offerings, vowing to worship only the one God even when he is accompanying his king to prayers in another god's temple. And Elisha sends him off with a ministerial benediction, "Go in peace."

And so, it ends there...at least we think. Now let's talk about God's inclusive mercy and all the other interesting themes that come out of this story.

But oh...if we have learned nothing else from the Old Testament, lets at least learn this: There are generally no happy endings. Because no matter what God does, no matter how many good kings we are given, no matter how many beautiful gardens we can romp in, humanity is going to find some way to screw this up for ourselves...

This story is no different – since there is still more to this story. As you know, I follow the lectionary. But the scripture picker outers for this Sunday stopped, for some reason, at the good part, the high part, the part where we can feel good about God and ourselves. However, there is an epilogue for this story and that’s where it gets even more interesting.

Elisha’s servant, Gehazi, thinks that Naaman got off a little easy. So, he takes it on himself to run after Naaman and ask for something, “for the company of the prophets.” Just a small amount, a talent of silver and a couple of changes of clothes. Naaman is feeling quite generous in his new boyish skin and readily agrees, even throwing in an extra talent and making his servants carry the stuff for Gehazi.

Gehazi goes back to Elisha, who asks where he has been and Gehazi makes a common mistake. He knows Elisha isn’t going to like what he did, so he lies and says that he hasn’t gone anywhere. Elisha says, “Please. Like I don’t know that you chased after that General. Well, you made a poor choice and this is not the time to accept money and clothing.” Elisha gets a little carried away, accusing him also of accepting olive orchards, and sheep, and vineyards, and servants, and then curses him and his descendants with Naaman’s leprosy.

Let’s take a minute to feel sorry for Gehazi, the servant. Look, he isn’t the man of God. He isn’t communicating with God on a minute-by-minute basis, he isn’t that close to the Supreme Being. He is, probably what most of us are, in our real lives. The operations guy who is checking Google for potential gridlock while making travel arrangements...The financial person tracking funds in vs funds out and making sure the expense report gets filed for reimbursement...The dispatcher who is just trying to get the deliverables out on the scheduled date. The assistant to the directors whose job it is to move the boss from one meeting to the next without embarrassing themselves...Gehazi is us.

And we don't understand.

There was going to be a pleasing symmetry to this transaction. Someone was willing to give a price for a rendered service. It was above board; it was an equal exchange of resources (your money for my healing arts). It was quid pro quo. It was something for something, not something for nothing. It's strictly business! It's only fair!

And then...it all became so terribly unfair.

First, Elisha decides he doesn't need the money. Who is he to decide that? Is he the guy that pays the bills? Is he the one that has to catch locusts if they can't afford bread at the market? But then all Gehazi does is suggest a small donation to the prophet's cause. A donation that the General is more than willing to give! Doesn't even blink at giving it up, he's so thrilled with the outcome he throws in more. Gehazi could have suggested twice as much!...And for that Gehazi is given some nasty skin disease.

So here is what I think bothers us as Christians who grew up in the church. Or maybe I should just speak for myself here and say what bothers me as a Christian who grew up in the church. It isn't so much that God's mercy is wide. I like wideness! Wideness is great...wideness speaks of big tents and openness and ignoring people that I disagree with (but at least I let them into the tent!). Yes, let's bring in our enemies, bring in the strangers, bring in the sick, bring in the oppressed and the oppressor. But what is difficult for me is that fundamentally, God's mercy is unfair. It doesn't honor the symmetry; it doesn't take into account the available resources and suggest an appropriate sum. There is no sliding entry fee at the Big Tent door, no "pay what you can."

Sometimes, it appears to me, that those with the least to pay (emotionally, spiritually, physically) have to pay the most and sometimes those who could pay tenfold the asking price and not even blink do not have to pay a dime.

There is a reason the Brethren really like the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are completely fair. They even have if/then statements built into them. Blessed are the mourners, for they will be comforted; blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth; if you are thirsty for righteousness, then you will be filled; if you are a peacemaker, then you will be called a child of God.

See? Symmetry. Anything less than this see-saw of if/then feels cheap to us. When something is too freely given to everyone - if there is not a price that comes with it - how can it have any value?

Now, it makes complete sense to waive that price for someone who cannot afford it. But to not even ask it of those who can? And yet God's mercy means that people who have not spent their lives being peacemakers - in fact, maybe being the opposite - will still be called a child of God; that those who have never before known a thirst for righteousness will be sitting next to us drinking their fill of the cup of Life; that I will sit in the wideness that is God's mercy next to people who I think should have paid way more than they did for their seat.

It could have been worse for Gehazi, I suppose, since Gehazi is mentioned again later, not appearing any the worse for wear. I think we can safely assume that his affliction was a temporary thing...like an allergic reaction or a bad sunburn. But still, Gehazi was clearly being taught a lesson...so we are all taught a lesson. That God's mercy is given - not according to our rules, not according to our understanding, not according to what we think is the appropriate price to pay. But that God's mercy is given to those who seek it and that we - humanity, other Christians - cannot determine what should or should not be the cost.

And while this is all terribly unfair, it is at the same time completely fair. And thus, the paradox at the heart of God's mercy, of God's love, of God's grace, is that it is a thing so

beyond “value” that it has no value. Or maybe because it has no “value” it is the most valuable thing known to us. That when we make God’s mercy anything less than completely free, when we put a cost to it, we actually cheapen it.

So, we will be Gehazi, putting a price to things that have no price?...God will be merciful to us. For God’s love and grace knows no bounds and all anyone needs to do is ask.  
Amen.

Clay Z. Moyer

July 3, 2022      Hatfield Church of the Brethren