

**2 Kings 5: 1-17**  
**Friends and Enemies**  
**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Lynn Vahle**  
**August 19, 2007**

Maurice Chevalier made the song famous in a movie entitled “GiGi”. And while the movie and our text have nothing in common the song talks about little girls and when our text is used as a Sunday School lesson the role of the little girl in the story is held up to help children understand that even if they are little they can do and say important things.

We are continuing to look at the life of the prophet Elisha as told in the Old Testament book of 2 Kings. Much of the story of Elisha is told in terms of miracles and so we have to look carefully at the story to find out what the prophet is saying to the people and more importantly to the king.

Naaman was a top commander of the army of the king of Aram. Aram was the former name of the country that covered roughly the area occupied by Syria today. And then as now Aram was in conflict with Israel. Naaman we are told was a mighty warrior and he was a keen military mind winning almost impossible victories and putting him in good favor with the king who was most likely one named Ben-hadad. But in spite of his power and high place in the government Naaman suffered from an unsightly and uncomfortable skin condition. It is called leprosy but it is not the disease we know by that name today. Most likely it was a disease that caused scales to form on the skin. As with most skin disorders it was accompanied by a constant itch and frequent pain. And it probably affected the face as well as other parts of the body.

We don’t know if this was a recent or a long standing condition. It didn’t interfere with his work but no doubt it left the great general constantly

uncomfortable. And apparently it was a concern in his household. Many treatments had been tried but without success. And perhaps only those in his household knew how much he suffered with this condition.

In Naaman's house there was a young woman who was a servant for Naaman's wife. The young woman had been seized in a raid on Israel and brought back as a slave. You might expect her to be angry and resentful and at least secretly happy over the plight of her employer. Instead she is concerned for his welfare. One day in a conversation she expresses her concern to Mrs. Naaman: "If only my lord were in Samaria. There is a prophet there that I know could cure him". We understand how desperate the situation is because as soon as his wife has passed on the conversation Naaman is asking the king for a leave of absence to go and find this prophet. Because Naaman is a favorite of the king his request is granted and he is given a letter of introduction and gold and silver and clothing to use as gifts.

When Naaman finally arrives in Samaria he goes directly to the palace of King Jehoram and gives him his letter of introduction. The king of Israel is disturbed. He knows he can't heal Naaman and he's sure that this is some kind of set up that will end with Syria once again raiding and plundering Israel. But when Elisha hears this whole story he sends the king of Israel a message, "Send him to me. He is looking for a prophet and I have been waiting for his arrival".

Naaman and his entourage pull up in front of Elisha's house. He is anxious to meet this man and he is curious as well. He waits for Elisha to come out of the house and greet him. Maybe even bow before him in deference to his position and power. Instead Elisha sends out a servant with some instructions. "Go down to the Jordan river and dip yourself in the water seven times and your skin will be restored and you will be clean".

Naaman is furious! He had some idea of how this would go but this wasn't it. He felt as though the prophet was dismissing him. Not taking him seriously. He felt humiliated in front of his servants when the prophet wouldn't even talk to him face to face. So he huffed and puffed and he complained about the formula he was given. Surely it would never work. Once again servants enter the picture and convince him that he should follow the instructions. After all they are quite simple and what has he got to lose.

At this point in the story I am reminded of my medical career. How often we as patients are told there are simple things we can do to help ourselves get and stay well. We can eat well, get some exercise, give up smoking and limit our intake of alcohol, fats and sugar. But we are convinced that the only thing that will make us feel better is a pill, or sometimes surgery, or some exotic treatment we found on the internet. Like Naaman we are not content with instructions to do the simplest thing.

Eventually Naaman does what he was told to do and his skin is restored and he is made clean, even in the dirty and polluted Jordan river. But the point of this story isn't really the miraculous healing. At least one lesson from the story is that the healing has a profound effect on Naaman's belief system. He returns to Elisha and this time wins an audience. And he vows that from now on he will worship the God of the Israelites because he has become convinced that there is only one God.

And Naaman's response brings to mind what do we do when we have been healed. Some healings of things like the common cold, seasonal flu, an upset stomach we take for granted. And we forget that all healing is a gift of God. In bigger issues we are thankful for skillful surgeons or modern medicine or all the technological advances there have been in our world that

increase our chances of being healed. We may even thank God in an off hand way. But for most of us most of the time I think it would be fair to say we don't see and acknowledge the hand of God in our healing. Naaman didn't think for a minute that the Jordan had magical properties or that Elisha was a wonder worker. Naaman knew and acknowledged the source of his healing. He was transformed or converted by his healing. Can we say the same?

In the New Testament Jesus refers to this story in his own ministry. In Lk. 4 we hear Jesus saying : "There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian". Jesus tells us what the point of Elisha's healing miracle was. Jesus tells us what Elisha was saying through his actions. What Jesus is alluding to and what he lived out in his own ministry was that the message of God's healing and redeeming love didn't belong exclusively to the people of Israel. Through Naaman it became evident that God could and did heal people who not only weren't from Israel but who were in fact Israel's enemy. God was not bound by the geo-political boundaries that the people of Israel had put in place. Faith was not the private possession of the chosen people. In his own ministry Jesus went out of his way to bring the good news of God's love to those who were on the fringes or beyond the limits of Jewish society - the tax collectors and prostitutes, the Samaritans and the Romans, the poor and those without any legal standing.

It is one thing to love your neighbor as you love yourself. That is hard enough. But the message of Elisha and the message of Jesus is that we are to love our enemies as well. In place of conflict and confrontation we are to work for their well-being. We are to desire and do what we can for their healing. They are the children of God as surely as we are. And God loves

them in the same way God loves us - independent of their actions, beliefs, or ideas. And God's love has the power to transform them as well as us.

When we take those truths and attempt to apply them nationally or globally we begin to understand how radical the message of Elisha and the message of Jesus really are. Imagine Elisha healing the commander of the enemy's army. The same commander who had no doubt in the past directed the troops of Aram to overrun Israel and take captive Israel's citizens, even children. Elisha did not become a favorite of the king and Jesus was run out of his hometown by the people who knew him best. The Gospel always reaches beyond our comfort zone. And we do not control the good news of God's love. It controls us.

Let us pray.