

Sunday, July 3, 2016 – 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Preacher: Rev. Douglas J. Brouwer

Sermon Title: “The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy”

Scripture Reading: 1 Kings 5:1-14

(The second reading for Sunday will be Psalm 30.)

Note: Here's how my friend, Doug Bratt, introduces today's reading: Namaan is the commander of the Syrian army whom his boss likes a lot. He's also highly decorated for bravery in battle. In fact, Namaan is somehow so special that God has even helped him win his country's battles. So he's the kind of powerful person to whom you need to pay attention if you're going to get anywhere in his Middle East. However, mighty Namaan also has even mightier leprosy. After all, diseases don't pay much attention to their victims' status or character. Sickness, with a few notable exceptions, is an equal opportunity tormentor.

1. Have you heard someone say, “why me,” in response to a serious illness? Of course you have. We all have. This is a tricky question to answer because it assumes – doesn't it? - that some of us don't deserve illness. Some of us, as a matter of fact, think we deserve better. Before going any further with this story, I recommend that you sort out your thinking on this. Is illness a random sort of thing, or does God send it purposely to some (and not others)?
2. Serious illness causes us to do interesting, sometimes desperate, things. In search of healing, we seek out “alternative therapies” or “clinical trials,” even if they are risky, because, well, we are desperate to be well. It isn't much of a stretch to think that Namann tried everything he could think of, too, because in the end he turns to ... one of his wife's slaves. Just think about that. As the Lutheran preacher Barbara Lundblad has put it, the slave girl “is as small as Namaan is great.” She's as weak as he is powerful. But she has connections! Before Namaan has even left Syria, he has faced his first spiritual lesson. Can you name it?
3. No sooner has Namaan's pride suffered a blow by having to accept a recommendation from his wife's slave girl, but Elisha compounds the problem by ... well, by not treating Namaan in the manner he expects. Namaan arrives with gifts, and Elisha basically ignores him. What makes this story at first entertaining and then sad is how Namaan responds. Namaan knows what a prophet should do! Namaan knows what healing looks like! Elisha wasn't following the script. I wonder if we also don't come to God with a script in mind for how God should take care of us. When I hear people pray (in worship and elsewhere), I am often struck by how specific we are. We actually lay out the plan that we expect God to follow! Isn't that similar to what happens here? What happens when God heals in a way that's different from what we expect?
4. At this point – in case you're counting, it's the third time this happens – Namaan's servants have to intervene and convince him to do as Elisha commands. Aren't the rivers in Syria far superior to the muddy trickle known as the Jordan River? Well, yes, but some of us do not learn our spiritual lessons quickly. Here's the irony of the story: when Namaan emerged from the river, he looked (I'm thinking of his skin, of course, but also his heart) like the poor slave girl who first suggested that he make this trip. His leprosy was healed, yes, but something more was purified. Aren't God's healings always bigger and more profound than we expect? Namaan wanted the leprosy gone, but God's intent was far larger.

5. In Luke 4:27, Jesus refers to the healing of Namaan, and the story infuriated those who were reminded of it. Why? Well, God chose to heal Namaan while apparently neglecting a lot of Israelites who were similarly afflicted with leprosy. Why him and not them? The annoying, mysterious, utterly infuriating thing is, we don't get to choose **how** God heals. And we don't get to choose **whom** God heals. We may wonder at the choices God makes – why does God allow an innocent child to die, for example, while allowing a brutal dictator to go on making the lives of his people miserable? - but we are left with the truth that God is free, that God does not treat us as we deserve, that God operates with a mercy and grace and kindness beyond all human understanding. (Just consider for a moment that “God does not treat us as we deserve” might be good news, the best news ever.)