

Feb. 12, 2012

When Water is Hard

2 Kings 5:1-14

While I was in seminary, a classmate of mine was diagnosed with breast cancer. Without missing any classes, she fought it until it went into remission. The next year, she graduated from seminary and began serving a church.

A couple of years ago, the cancer returned, this time in her lungs. She has been in treatment ever since.

The medical facilities where she lives are limited. She cannot get her chemotherapy or radiation in town. To get to her monthly treatment sessions she has to drive more than an hour to the airport, fly to the nearest big city, and get a ride from the airport to the hospital.

She is fortunate that she has friends who drive her to and from the airport and friends that she can stay with overnight in the city before she heads home the next day.

It's a hard thing to manage all that, especially when she doesn't feel well. Anyone who has been through chemotherapy understands very well what she has been going through.

And there is no end in sight. The doctors say that she will need treatment for the long term. Her tumor is controlled, but it is not shrinking. This regimen will continue for the foreseeable future.

She is not expecting a cure, but she hopes to prolong her life as long as possible.

She loves life and she is willing to do the hard thing to go on living! She is serving God and praying that she can go on serving God as long as she has breath!

We can do the hard things when we really want to!

In our scripture from the book of Second Kings today, we heard the story of General Naaman, a man who had experienced a lot of success on the battlefield and who had a lot of political power as well as military strength.

His life was great except for a little skin problem----he had a spot of leprosy. The term leprosy was used for a range of skin diseases then. We don't really know if what he had was Hansen's Disease, where the skin rots away and fingers and toes are destroyed.

Maybe he just had eczema and the itching was driving him crazy!

Whatever it was, he wanted to get rid of it. His wife had a little Israelite girl for a maid---a slave---who had been captured in battle and brought home to wait on his wife.

When this little girl, who doesn't even have a name in the story, heard about Naaman's leprosy, she told his wife about the prophet in Israel who could cure his disease.

The mighty general was brought low enough by his disease that he listened to a little slave girl, a foreign child who was captured in battle. Someone hardly worth anything---except for the knowledge she had about the prophet who could cure him of his leprosy.

And when I thought about this comedown---the mighty being brought low, I was reminded of the instructions Jesus gave, that -
----- read this morning----when you go to a banquet, don't take the highest place, because the host might ask you to move down to make room for a more honored guest, and you will be shamed.

Naaman had to overcome his shame in relying on the advice of a little slave girl. It could not have been easy for him to need help from anyone. He was powerful, in charge, used to winning. Not used to showing any sign of weakness.

And yet illness and desperation brought him low. And life will do that.

Bring us low, cut us down to size. Humble us. Shame us if we have set ourselves up too high.

Our human condition leaves us open and vulnerable. We cannot depend on our own strength to get us through. We need the help of others. We need God's help.

So Naaman, brought low, listened to a little slavegirl. And he went and asked the king to be allowed to go to Israel to find the prophet who could heal him.

The king wrote a letter of introduction to the king of Israel, and Naaman went to Israel, taking gold and silver and fine clothes to pay for having his disease cured.

He didn't know how else to find the prophet, and maybe he assumed that the king would have the prophet living with him, so he went to the King of Israel.

The king was kind of a conspiracy theorist, and he thought this was all a plot by the Aramean king to start a war, that failure to heal Naaman would be just an excuse to attack and conquer Israel. So he panicked.

The prophet Elisha heard about all this and sent a messenger to tell Naaman to come to his house.

Once again, Naaman is taken down a peg. Someone of his standing would expect the prophet to come to him and not the other way around.

And then when he got to Elisha's house, he was humbled still further. Elisha did not even come out himself, but sent a messenger out to tell Naaman to "go wash in the River of Jordan seven times and you will be healed!"

WHAT??!! What an insult!

Naaman's journey to health just kept getting harder and harder. Every step brought him lower and lower. He was a mighty general! Didn't this little prophet know who he was??

The nerve of him, not even coming out to greet him in person!!

And the JORDAN River?? Well, there were better rivers than that back home! He could have washed in them if washing in a river would really wash the leprosy away!

And he stomped off.

And then he was brought still lower.

One of his servants got brave enough to ask him a question.

“If the prophet had asked you to do something hard, you would have done it. But he asked you to do something easy. Why don’t you go ahead and do it, just to see what happens?”

The truth is that Naaman was used to doing the hard things. He had worked his way to the top of his profession by being the strongest and the bravest and the toughest.

Being brought down from that place of power and respect and self-reliance----that was hard.

But he listened to that servant and went and washed in the Jordan River----maybe the hardest thing he had ever done was to lower himself into that water.

But he came up clean, free of leprosy. And not only was he cleansed of his disease, but his soul was healed as well! He turned away from his Aramean gods and began to worship the God of Israel!

Praise God, who works in amazing ways!

So Naaman went from being the dinner guest who sat at the highest table, to being humbled by being asked to move lower by a slavegirl and still lower by the prophet and lower yet by his own servant,

to being asked to move back up to the higher table by God himself by being healed body and soul!

By admitting that he needed the help of a slavegirl and a prophet and a servant, he shed his pride and arrogance.

It was not only his skin that was restored to that of a young boy. It was his ego!

Children know they are dependent on others for things, and they are not ashamed by that.

It is only as we get older that we believe that we can really take care of ourselves on our own. Then we grow a hard shell that says we should not admit weakness, that we don't need help from others.

Sometimes that pride and that self-sufficiency comes from being hurt by others when we have asked for help. Sometimes it is purely a product of our upbringing----“Man up! And take care of business for yourself!” we are told.

“Stop being a baby! Be strong!”

And we do need to become mature human beings who step up and do what we can. But there are times when we need help and we're too proud to ask anyone.

And when we're too proud to admit our need for help to ourselves, it's a problem. Because then we don't even ask God.

Think about it! In your prayers, when was the last time you asked God to help YOU!? We pray for others, for those we love, for other people who are struggling, for the world in general, but when you, personally, pray, do you ever ask God, "Help me! Help me! Help me!"

or do you pray as though you don't need any help for yourself?

It can be hard to ask for help. It can be hard to go wash in the Jordan River.

The waters of the River Jordan can be hard because they can wash away our old lives, they can change us, they can lead us in new directions.

When we ask God for help and that prayer is answered, we have to give up our image of ourselves as strong and independent. We have to admit that there is something wrong with us, that there is something that needs to be washed away!

We have all been created by God to have certain attributes, certain gifts and talents, a particular set of strengths of weaknesses that we are meant to use in conjunction with other people as we join together as the Body of Christ.

We are created in a way that we can perfectly fulfill what God has called each one of us to do, with our interests, our passions, our hopes and our dreams.

And then somewhere along the way the world tells us that we can't be that way, that we are not being realistic or practical, that we're not good enough or smart enough or talented enough to do what we want to do.

The world tells us we're inadequate to follow our dreams, that our interests are ridiculous, that what we hope is never going to come true.

The world tells us that it's not worth doing the hard work of staying alive, of becoming fully alive!

And so what needs to be washed away in our own Jordan Rivers is all that STUFF that the world has put on us, all that STUFF that the world has told us!! We could call all of that stuff “leprosy.”

All the lies, all the made-up rules, all the

Hate, mistrust, lack of faith, false gods.

When Naaman came up out of the Jordan, his skin was restored to being just like that of a young boy.

And he turned away from the gods he had always worshipped and committed himself to worshipping the God of Israel.

So once we have washed away all the parts of ourselves that the world has piled on top of us---all those lies and misconceptions, all the uncertainties and doubts---we are restored to the way we were as young children, to the way that God created us to be.

And we stop worshipping the false gods----the ones that tell us we're not good enough, that we can't follow our hopes and dreams, that tell us that we can't do what God is calling us to do.

The false gods that lead us to chase money and power and possessions.

The false gods that lead us into temptation and away from the one who created us to be part of the Body of Christ and living life abundant and full in the light of love and peace and joy and hope.

When we come up out of the Jordan River, wherever that might be and whatever that might mean for each one of us, we will be clean and whole again, healed of our hurts and our imperfections.

My friend from seminary may never be healed of her cancer, although prayer is powerful and may yet surprise the doctors.

But even if her body is not healed, I know one thing.

She has been to the Jordan River. She has waded right in and washed her spirit clean. She knows who she is---a beloved daughter of God! And she knows that she has been called to serve God by being in full-time ministry to the people of a little town. That town might be far from her cancer treatments, but it is near to the heart of God, because she is there.

And wherever we are is also near to the heart of God, because we are also beloved children of God.

Step into the waters of God's love and wash away the dirt and lies and sins of the world. Wash it all away until you are restored to the way God created you to be, and you are his and his alone.

Come and worship the one true God who made you to live
life to the fullest, walking in love and peace and joy and hope.
Come and wash in the River of Jordan and be made whole again.

Amen.