

“I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For”

Mark 1: 40-45

2 Kings 5:1-14

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When we want to hire someone, whether it’s a business hiring a manager or CEO or a church calling a new Associate Pastor, we tend to begin by looking at a person’s resume. What experience, what accomplishments, what leadership qualities does a person bring to the job? And that’s not a bad place to start. This past week I came across an interesting article online about answers that people had given to questions from human resource departments for job interviews. In response to the question, “Are there any significant experiences you have had, or accomplishments you have realized, that have helped to define you as a person?” one (eccentric?) young man answered:

I am a dynamic figure, often seen scaling walls and crushing ice. I have been known to remodel train stations on my lunch breaks, making them more efficient in the area of heat retention. I translate for Cuban refugees, I write award-winning operas, I manage time efficiently. Occasionally, I tread water for three days in a row.

I can pilot bicycles up severe inclines with unflagging speed, and I cook Thirty Minute Brownies in twenty minutes. I am an expert in stucco, I play bluegrass cello, and I was scouted by the Mets. I am the subject of numerous documentaries. When I’m bored, I build large suspension bridges in my yard. I enjoy urban hang gliding. On Wednesdays, after school, I repair electrical appliances free of charge.

Critics worldwide swoon over my original line of corduroy evening wear. I don’t perspire. I am a private citizen, yet I receive fan mail. I have been caller number nine and won the weekend passes. I bat .400. My deft floral arrangements have earned me fame in international botany circles. Children trust me.

I once read Paradise Lost, Moby Dick, and David Copperfield in one day and still had time to refurbish an entire dining room that evening. I

know the exact location of every food item in the supermarket. I have performed covert operations for the CIA. I sleep once a week; when I do sleep, I sleep in a chair. While on vacation in Canada, I successfully negotiated with a group of terrorists who had seized a small bakery. The laws of physics do not apply to me.

I balance, I weave, I dodge, I frolic, and my bills are all paid. On weekends, to let off steam, I participate in full-contact origami. Years ago I discovered the meaning of life but forgot to write it down. I have made extraordinary four-course meals using only a Mouli and a toaster oven. I breed prizewinning clams. I have won bullfights in San Juan, cliff-diving competitions in Sri Lanka, and spelling bees at the Kremlin. I have played Hamlet, I have performed open-heart surgery, and I have spoken with Elvis.

So, a pretty impressive resume! Be assured that I have passed this name along to the Associate Pastor Nominating Committee! The truth is that a resume alone often does not reveal much about a person's true character.

We know that often it is actually when a person is in the midst of more challenging circumstances, faced with a difficult decision, or with tragedy or grief or a monumental task or peer pressure that another side, perhaps a truer side of their character comes forward. In our story of Naaman this morning, we see his true character revealed during this time of urgent need in his life...a need that even he as a mighty warrior is powerless to overcome alone.

First, to his credit, Naaman does some surprising things. He takes the advice of his wife's servant girl who suggests that her master see the prophet in her homeland in order to be healed of leprosy. This is particularly surprising because she would have been considered insignificant in that culture for several reasons: she was a slave, she was a child, she was a foreigner, she was female: all reasons that her words should have fallen on deaf ears. Yet, Naaman has the wisdom (and perhaps the desperation) to take her advice. Further, he even decides to travel to a foreign land and seek help way outside the bounds of his comfort zone.

But at the same time, we see Naaman's ignorance and arrogance shine through as well. We find him turning first for answers from the most powerful people that he has access to, both his own king and the king of Israel. Then, even when he realizes that he needs to go see the humble prophet personally we find him expecting healing to be achieved through some magical or magnificent action. Naaman, accustomed to great pomp and ceremony, is insulted when the prophet sends a mere messenger to tell him to wash seven times in the Jordan River. He is prepared to pay millions of dollars, and as one of his servants points out, he is prepared to perform any number of difficult tasks to receive this gift from God. But he is unprepared for the simple formula offered by Elisha. Perhaps he thought that Elisha was mocking him—trying to make him appear foolish. “Look, there he is, the great general bathing in the muddy waters of the Jordan at the command of a humble Hebrew prophet.” Or maybe he just thought that there should be special miracles for special people.

In the end, his vulnerability and willingness to lay aside his ego allowed him not only to be healed of his leprosy, but also to be transformed from a man who had faith only in his access to the power of influence, wealth, and personal achievement to a man who came to know the exclusive and ultimate power of God.

The challenge for Naaman ultimately was that the prescription for healing that he was given seemed too simple, but Naaman did not consider himself to be a simple man. He was a great general. I wonder, how many invitations to healing and wholeness do we miss because we expect God to act in and through the powerful, the popular, the dramatic, or the extraordinary? Could it be that we overlook how God works in ordinary ways and through people we often dismiss? How does our ego get in the way of God's action and intention in our lives?

We find in the story of Naaman's healing a God who does not work under the glare of the spotlight, but instead comes to us in the whispers of children, the vulnerability of silence, a stream of water... Likewise in the gospel reading, Jesus is approached by a leper who wants to be healed. Without fanfare, pomp or ceremony, Jesus asks him to stretch out his hand. Then Jesus touches it, and the leprosy is gone. The simple act of a

touch became the vehicle of God's healing grace, not only of the man's leprosy, but the reconciliation of his relationships with his family and community.

I have to confess this morning that I can sympathize with Naaman. It does seem too simple. The gospel calls us on a road to healing and wholeness, but its steps are so deceptively simple (which doesn't mean easy) that we often don't take them seriously and so don't do them. But then again, Naaman was healed.

I've done what Naaman did over and over. Done the heavy miles and skipped the simple steps. If something was so simple it didn't seem as if it would do much then I skipped it. I've spent twenty years of my life in formal education...three of them in theological education, but how often do I bother with half an hour a day of silent prayer. Why is it easier to sign up for a rigorous course in theology or spirituality or even Bible study, but so hard to just sit down and be quiet and let God speak to me? Too simple to bother with: so simple we don't imagine that it would be of much value.

And what about our relationships with one another? Isn't it the simple things that determine whether or not they are healthy and life-giving. If, in relating to one another, we put all of our energy into the big events — the birth of a baby or an annual holiday or a birthday luncheon or a visit to the hospital — and don't bother with the ordinary, day to day, little ways of relating, the relationship will not be nurtured. It's the ongoing little things, those that seem too simple to be significant, that keep the relationship growing and that provide the context to enable the big things to be more meaningful, too.

Those simple little things seem so unlikely to yield any fruit, and those big impressive things seem so much more promising. But the leper wasn't healed at a coliseum crusade or with a bolt of lightning or a shout from Heaven, but in a gentle touch. And Naaman discovered that his power, his influence and his wealth were all worthless currency in the kingdom of God. It wasn't until he set them all aside that Naaman was healed.

Now, imagine if a friend, a neighbor or a colleague at work asked you why you go to church and you knew that they had never been in a

church service in their entire lives. I might imagine, optimistically, that you would tell them about what a great church this is and how wonderful it is to be a part of this community. Then they ask you how they can become a part of this community, what kind of resume do they need, what kind of connections should they have in place. To their surprise, you tell them it is as simple as being dipped into or sprinkled by some water in the name of the triune God. In doing so, you say, we are healed of our sin and united with Christ and Christ's community. Ridiculous, they might think, that is too simple. How could such a simple act possibly have such extraordinary consequences? Too simple to take seriously really, isn't it? But then again, Naaman was healed.

Most of what we do in here, Sunday by Sunday, is relatively simple. You don't need to climb any high mountains in search of a guru. We don't ask you to fast for forty days or trek across the continent on your knees. We simply gather together, occasionally one of us takes a dip in some ordinary water. We listen to stories from long ago. We take time for silence and prayer and share some ordinary bread and wine.

There will always be people trying to complicate it by telling us we need to add this, that or the other thing, things bigger and more impressive. Yes, you might occasionally see some spectacular consequences of your participation in God's ministry and mission, but don't go getting carried away making them the measure of your faithfulness or of God's power. The real cause for celebration is the little things — the simple stuff. Perhaps Naaman wouldn't have bothered. Perhaps sometimes we wonder why we bother...But then again, Naaman was healed.

God has come to us in simple things — water, bread, wine — but it is easy for us to rebel. We don't want to be simple people. We wanted to be sophisticated over-achievers. But God is going to keep calling us to do the simple things and in them will lie all the glorious gifts of God. Let's not go storming back to Aramea in a tantrum because it was all too simple. God's gift of life is simply too good to miss!

BENEDICTION

Naaman is like the man in an old joke who is caught in a flood and goes up on the roof, where he intends to wait for God to rescue him. A rowboat comes by, then a Coast Guard vessel and then even a helicopter, but every time the man turns down their offers for help because he is waiting for God to save him. As you know, the man eventually drowns and is whisked up to the pearly gates where he confronts God. “Hey, I asked you to save me...what happened?” And God replies, “Look, I sent two boats and a helicopter...what more do you want?” It seems that most of God’s gifts of grace, healing and love are like rowboats. They come along regularly, but we might not notice the humble messenger or the simple vehicle. So, as you go out from this place, keep your eyes open, keep your ego in check ... and just get into the boat.

Amen.