

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost
July 3, 2016
Marley United Methodist Church, Glen Burnie MD

2 Kings 5.1-14*
Psalm 30
Galatians 6.1-16
Luke 10.1-11, 17-18*

Keep It Simple, Stupid

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen

The formula was simple. A child could understand it. “Go wash yourself seven times in the Jordan . . . and you will be healed.” But the person receiving this simple formula was not a simple man. Naaman was a great general in the Syrian Army. We do not know he was a great general because we are told about his campaigns. Rather his greatness is revealed in the fact that he was the commander of the King's army despite the fact that he had a serious skin condition – some even believe he was a leper.

One way or the other, if Naaman had been an Israelite, he would have been required to live apart from everyone else. Apparently as a Syrian, he didn't, but his disease was still considered both hideous and incurable. According to this scripture, he and his king were willing to pay millions of dollars, measured in today's currency, if the disease could be cured.

After a couple of plot twists in the story to keep the drama going, Naaman presents himself before the humble home of Elisha the prophet, millions of dollars in hand to pay for the cure he so desperately wants . . . and Elisha won't even come to the door! Instead, Elisha sends a servant to give the great general the simple formula, “Go and wash in the Jordan seven times . . . and you will be healed.”

And Naaman is furious. He has travelled a great distance to get a cure for his terrible disease. 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 offended by the simplicity of the simple formula offered by Elisha – surely, someone of his importance should have something more elaborate to do – something befitting his station in life.

“Go and wash in the river, and you will be healed.”

It was all too simple. He thought Elisha was mocking him--trying to make him appear foolish. Just imagine, the great general of a mighty empire, bathing in the muddy waters of the Jordan at the command of a Hebrew prophet! I can sympathize with him too, because Elisha is not one of my favorite Biblical characters. He could be rude and arrogant at times, and I think his refusal to even meet Naaman was ungracious and an unnecessarily callous act, not at all consistent with the gracious hospitality Jesus commended in our gospel reading.

Fortunately, Naaman lets himself be persuaded by his servant. And the story tells us that Naaman walked from the waters not only healed in his body, but also giving praise to the one true God of all the earth.

I can also sympathize with Naaman, because, really, it was too simple. It really was too simple. You would think the important points in life would be more momentous somehow. He nearly missed out on the healing because it was too simple.

It was as simplistic as the Church saying that if we are dipped into water in the name to the triune God we'll be healed of sin and united to Christ. How could such a simple act possibly have such extraordinary and otherworldly consequences? No wonder we no longer really take Baptism all that seriously and have allowed it to deteriorate into a photo opportunity with a cute baby. How can such a simple act be so important to our spiritual life? But Naaman was healed.

I've done what Naaman did over and over. I've done the heavy miles and skipped the simple steps. If something was so simple that it didn't seem like it would do much, then I skipped it. If something wasn't glitzy enough

to grab my attention, I ignored it. I could do 4 years of theological study and countless hours of continuing education but have trouble with half an hour a day of silent prayer. I could devote nearly 30 years of my life training several times a week in a martial art, but had trouble finding the time to meet once a month with a spiritual mentor or prayer group.

But when you think about relationships, whether with God or with some significant other in your life, it really is the simple things that determine whether or not the relationship is healthy and life-giving. If, in relating to my wife, I put all my energy into the big events – the birth of a grandchild or our wedding anniversary or her birthday dinner or something – if I did that and didn't bother with the ordinary, day to day, little things that feed our relationship, it probably wouldn't last very long. It's the ongoing little things, that seem too simple to be significant, that keep the relationship growing and that provide the context which allows the big things to happen. In the martial arts we have many sayings which encapsulate 'truths' that are worth remembering. One of them is "The important things are always simple – and the simple things are always difficult." And Naaman was healed.

You know, most of what we do in this room, Sunday after Sunday, is relatively simple. You don't need to climb any high mountains, or fast for forty days, or climb up the steps on your knees. We simply gather with friends, sing some songs, pray some prayers – some of which are the same each week, listen to some ancient stories, spend some time in silence, break some bread and share some wine – its all simple stuff. Perhaps Naaman wouldn't have bothered. Perhaps sometimes we wonder why we bother. But Naaman was healed.

In between our weekly gatherings here, there are lots of other simple little things that are even easier to overlook and not get around to--like time for daily Bible reading, study and prayer. It is always a danger to skip the little things and try to get the weekly service to carry the weight of our whole spiritual life. Much of the value of the worship service is to set an example for us of practices we can build into the rest of our week.

And yet strangely, most of us, and I'm no exception, would find it easier to enroll in a demanding and expensive course on spirituality somewhere than we would to spend twenty minutes a day in prayerful silence. Those simple little things seem so unlikely to yield any fruit, and those big impressive things seem so much more promising. But Elijah didn't hear the voice of God in the storm or the earthquake or the bushfire, but in the sound of sheer silence, check it--1 Kings 19. And Naaman wasn't healed by paying millions of dollars or by crawling up a mountain on his knees. It was a simple little thing he had to do, and Naaman was healed.

The road to life in all its fullness is made up of little steps, most of them seem so insignificant as to be irrelevant to our hoped for destination, you know, like church:

1. A dip in some ordinary water.
2. Listen to stories from long ago.
3. Have someone like me prod you into considering what relevance those stories may have to our lives in the here and now.
4. Share joys and concerns and some prayer.
5. Eat the bread and drink the juice.
6. Sing a few songs

They are all simple little steps, none of which seem all that momentous – but Naaman was healed.

And as Paul said in Galatians (6:1-16), there will always be people trying to complicate it by telling us we need to add this that or the other thing, to do things to make it bigger and more impressive. But it is the simple things that count – and all that really matters, he says, is that you are a new creation.

And as Jesus said in the gospel reading we heard (Luke 10:1-11, 17-18), you might occasionally see some spectacular consequences of your participation in his mission, but don't go getting carried away and make them the measure of your relationship.

The real cause for celebration is the little things: “rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” It might seem ridiculously simple when we expected our faithfulness to cause Satan to fall from heaven like lightning and the demons to submit.

But, no, Jesus says, just pay attention to the simple little things of the faith, even those so simple they do not seem to be of any consequence. And rejoice that your name is written in heaven. Because Naaman was healed.

Amen