

“The Simple Choice”

2 Kings 5: 1-14, Luke 10: 1-10, 16-20

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, July 8, 2007

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It's not easy taking advice from a stranger. Have you ever been engaged in a serious conversation with a friend, say at lunch, when a well-meaning diner overhears you, turns around and offers you some advice? First, you are probably annoyed because it means this well-intentioned person has heard most of what you thought was a private conversation. Then you are annoyed because they have the audacity to interrupt your conversation to give you unsolicited advice. You are likely to ignore what they tell you out of principle. Even if the advice is sure to bring you the peace of mind or healing you so desperately need, you may choose to disregard it based solely on the circumstance in which it was delivered.

This morning we meet Namaan, a man in desperate need of some sound advice. He longs to be healed, but seems doomed to ignore the good advice he receives because he does not like the manner in which he has received it. Namaan is a very important man living with a horrible disease. Even though he is a chief commander in his king's army he suffers from leprosy. He is a strong and powerful man however, his disease threatens to rob him of the authority he appears to have. Namaan can take down an entire army; however, he does not have the power to cure the disease from which he suffers. He can hardly tell people what to do when people can not take their eyes off his disfiguring skin condition or he is deemed “unclean.”

Today's story is about power; those who have it, how they use it and the seemingly powerless people that understand the true meaning of power. Namaan understands power in one way. He is a trained warrior and sees the world through a warrior's eyes. He understands power as domination, power over another person, the power to control your own destiny. He can not accept being powerless. He can not be a mighty warrior if people are unwilling to shake his hand or if he needs to hide his face so they can not see the condition of his skin. Namaan is desperate for a cure. There is a little bit of Namaan in all of us, unwilling to admit we are powerless and needing to rely on another person's power to get what we need.

Ironically, it is a slave girl whom he has captured in battle that holds the promise to Namaan's future. This Hebrew slave girl tells her mistress about Elisha the prophet. She insists he can heal Namaan if he only asks. The wife speaks to her husband, the husband goes to the king and the king writes a note to the king of Israel believing he has the power to heal Namaan. Something definitely got lost in translation. When Namaan arrives on his doorstep, the bewildered king has no idea what is happening. He is not a healer. He is a ruler and has no idea why Namaan has come to see him. Namaan brings with him cash, perhaps to sweeten the deal or at least to offer as a gesture of gratitude. Still the king is confused and perceives this as a hostile gesture. Surely there is something fishy going on here. In his confusion the King of Israel says, “Just look and see how he is trying to pick

a quarrel with me.” Thankfully, Elisha gets wind of what has happened and steps in to save the day. He instructs Namaan to come see him and he will take care of everything.

Namaan arrives on Elisha’s doorstep with his entourage expecting to receive a hero’s welcome. Instead, a servant comes out to greet Namaan in Elisha’s absence. He instructs Namaan to go to the River Jordan and bathe in it seven times. That is all. Instead of heading straight for the river, Namaan is incensed. I came all this way to bathe in the nasty Jordan River seven times? It can’t be that simple. Furthermore, Namaan is ready to walk away empty handed because the prophet didn’t come to greet him personally. You can imagine Namaan’s reply to this lowly servant, “Don’t you know who I am?” In his outrage, Namaan was ready to go home without his much anticipated healing when his own servants step in to save the day.

They remind Namaan that if the prophet had instructed him to do something difficult he would have done it without hesitation. Why then, when the solution is simple and right before his eyes, does he not respond with the same enthusiasm? It can’t be that easy. He came all that way and all it takes is seven dips in a muddy river? Why not the mighty Euphrates? Why this yucky river in enemy territory? Namaan finally gives in and does as he is told. After all, he has come all this way and he would hate to go back to his old life, when a new one was within his grasp. So he bathes in the Jordan River, seven times as he is told. Imagine his anxiety. He goes into the water and under one time... nothing happens...two, three, four, five times and still nothing. Does he give up or continue as he is told? He goes under a sixth time and then finally a seventh. When he comes out of the water after the seventh time he is a changed man. His leprous skin is restored like the flesh of a young boy.

This is a complicated story. On the surface it seems simple enough. Man has disease, man needs healing, healing is available, man does as he is told, man is healed. However, beneath the obvious this story involves issues of class and power and faith. Namaan understood he had no future if he were not cured of his leprosy. However, in order to be healed, he needed to surrender to another person’s authority. He had to overcome his sense of entitlement and hurt feelings. He needed to acknowledge that the power to be healed rested with a higher authority. Those with the power were the ones he thought to be powerless. The captured one, the slave girl, had not lost her faith in Yahweh, despite her circumstances. Many of us can relate to Namaan’s story. Sometimes we are led to our own healing by the least likely people. Sometimes, the path to healing is painfully obvious to other people, however we are not able to see it until we relinquish our own power and submit to another authority.

A few weeks ago at the 8:30 service I shared a story of my own healing that took place for me 17 years ago. It was the day I stopped drinking. I was still functioning with reasonable clarity; however, my binge drinking was threatening to wreak havoc in my life. There would be a day when it would affect my ability to do my job, to show up to work sober and not hopelessly hung over. Missing a class at seminary was one thing, having it affect my ability to minister to others was a sobering possibility. So, I listened to that voice within me that day that said I could no longer drink. Period. Ever. It seemed

like an obvious choice at the time. I have come to understand that it was the right choice, but it has not always been an easy choice. The choice Namaan made, to bathe 7 times in the river, may have seemed like the obvious choice for him as well, but it was not easy.

Some of the most important decisions we make in our lives may seem simple even obvious, but they are rarely easy. That is why we need the power of the Holy Spirit to help us make them (and then to help us see the value in having made them.) Some of the choices that bring healing to our lives also bring joy. Other choices, though the right ones, may bring us great pain. Namaan's choice restored him to a place of prominence in his community. This was not only because he was rid of a nasty skin disease that threatened his position and livelihood, but also because he learned even more important lessons that had nothing to do with his flesh. He learned to respect and honor the opinion of people he deemed inferior. He learned that people from other cultures and different traditions had something to teach him. He learned that he was not able to heal himself, that power wrested beyond him. He also learned that he was powerful in ways he had not understood before.

God uses all kinds of circumstances and all kinds of people to teach us. The true heroes in this story are then unnamed one, those who would otherwise go unnoticed. I am amazed by the servant girl's generosity. She could very easily have allowed Namaan to suffer in silence, knowing that the prophet had the power to heal, but not wanting to share that information with her oppressor. There is amazing power and amazing grace in this generosity of spirit. Again, Namaan's servants could have allowed him to suffer a second time when he was unwilling to set aside his pride to do as the prophet had instructed. Many times in our lives, other people help us to see the obvious. They help us to see what we can not when we are blinded by fatigue or depression or guilt or pride (or any number of other sins that get in our way.) Thankfully they make sure we do not miss out on healing as Namaan almost did, because we can't get ourselves "unstuck."

We all have those moments when we are willing to turn and walk away instead of submitting to God's will. Like Namaan we think, it can't be that easy. Instead of being grateful we argue with God, wondering "You want me to do what?" Have you ever known someone who has had a heart attack, undergone bypass surgery that promises to restore them to better health, who then refuses to give up smoking or make changes in their diet and lifestyle? The choices may seem simple enough to those who do not have to make them. In order to make those changes you have to humble yourself, admit that your former way of life needed to change and then perhaps, seek God's help in keeping these newly made promises. The choices may seem simple enough, the rewards may even seem obvious, but the decision is rarely easy to make.

We have the freedom to choose. God sends us messengers to point us in the right direction. God offers us a new way of being, but we have to submit to it. God provides companions for the journey that will help keep us strong, but we have to nurture those relationships. In other words, this healing business is a partnership. There is a power that can only come from God, but we too have something essential to offer. If we are not willing to change, not willing to submit, not willing to let go, then the healing will not

come. When we can do these things, when we take the plunge, our lives will be forever changed. The voice of God is calling you to a new way of being. Will you listen? Only say the word, God, and I will be healed. May it be so! Amen