

LEARNER'S MIND
THE HELP WE NEED

Texts on Sunday, July 28, 2013

2 Kings 5: 1-14; John 15: 12-17

Now we have heard another story of wondrous healing. Our Bible holds very many. We came to love them when we were little, and we may love them still, but they come with puzzles now. If they mean that God once acted with power, but does no more, then they pronounce a curse on us. If they mean that miracles, still possible, come only to people of great faith, or only to them with lots of people pulling for them, then God is like politicians, who care only for constituents with means. If miracles are just random acts of kindness, why bother with the God theory at all? And if the stories mean that ancient people were gullible, and saw magic anywhere, then we are wiser, but sadder—for never mind Bible stories; we still have sorrows and wounds and depressions and diseases which keep us from the help we need. Everyone hurts. Our dead boys won't walk again, the streets are mean, and greed is at the wheel of the world. Has this miracle story something to say to one who just wants to be whole? The word had better not be just heavenly sweet, but a goad and a guide.

Of all the figures in this story, only one is so anxious and untrusting and hurt that he cannot do any good. It is the king of Israel. He is you. He is me. This king represents every old thought we have about how things work. He stands for that forlorn wish we have for a leader to swoop in and save us from disaster. The king is in our every anxious thought about money or about next year's budget. The king is our fear that it will all turn out wrong if we make a wrong turn now, so we turn nothing at all. The king is that flat view of reality which sees only cause and effect; and works harder and harder to gun the engine of more cause for more effect—and is always exhausted.

In this story, the king has just lost a great battle with axis of evil, Syria. And the story says that God was on Syria's side in that battle! Are you . . . "Syria's"! Who ever told a story like this! Only ancient Israel ever had the guts to say that God shows up for the other side whenever we grow so sure we are the masters of cause and effect that God becomes an afterthought. Weak and full of pride, the king of Israel tears his clothes at the pickle he thinks he's in. He sounds just like us, mitching and moaning about how other people are making everything worse. Now, to him, Elisha sends a message, "Why tear your clothes? Let the general of the army of the enemy come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." But this message is first to the king of anxiety, which is why we have this story, all us

wearily and heavily burdened masters of how things work. This message is so that we may learn that there is a prophet in the land, that there moves here power not like our powers. To learn this, we need to come knowing nothing. We need a learner's mind, young and open like a child's.

Naaman, the great general of the enemy, much in favor there, has leprosy. Hearing that word still sends shivers of its curse, though we hardly know the disease. Still, we can feel its horror, which has to do neither with physical pain nor death's doom. To be a leper is to be broken off from the world because your face and skin are unbearable. To be a leper is to be forced to live out your life in social solitary confinement, useless and alone. Naaman's career is done; his wife, no doubt, is terrified at what's to come. His king is losing his chief defender. Who can act in this locked-down world of bad causes and bad effects? It is a young girl, captured from the land of Israel, servant to Naaman's wife, who can act. She is the free agent. Some Christians think our religion cornered the market on loving your enemy, but watch this girl. She shows love for her captor! To her mistress, she says, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! The prophet would cure him of his leprosy."

In the story where Elisha raised a dead boy to life, remember how it was the mother who made that miracle move. Now it is the slave girl from Israel who breaks the brittle chain of cause and effect with healing counsel for the her captor. She, who has no power, remembers where power moves. She speaks of a world not like the world of the anxious masters and cause and effect. If you want to be made whole, do not go looking for big solutions from strong men, the story says. Rather, find out: Who is that servant, whom thus far you have ignored, who knows what you do not know? Find the help you need from voices with no ordinary power, voices who remember God.

A little further on in this story, when Naaman has received instructions to go and wash seven times in the Jordan; while his pride still reels in rage at this appallingly small reception of his greatness; and he has stalked off; and the risk is high that there will come no healing, no learning; see this: It is Naaman's servants who nudge him toward the truth. "Father!" they say. "if the prophet had commanded something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" To you this morning, the word of God comes first as a plain question. Do you have the help you need? Do you know how to gather friends for your soul—not friends who tell you what you want to hear, but friends who care that you become who you are in the eye of God; soul friends who want you whole; friends who know that every round goes higher, higher; friends who'll help you when you stumble? Do you know how to find them and listen to

them who are not caught in the wheel of cause and effect—friends who can present the subversive terms of your conversion, as the poet T.S. Eliot put it?

In order to arrive at what you do not know

You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.

In order to possess what you do not possess

You must go by the way of dispossession.

In order to arrive at what you are not

You must go through the way in which you are not.

And what you do not know is the only thing you know . . .

T.S. Eliot, "East Coker" in *Four Quartets*, p. 15

An ordinary church is not much help here. In that subversive little book called *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about the church this way.

He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone. It may be that Christians, notwithstanding worship, common prayer, and all their fellowship in service, may still be left to their loneliness. The final breakthrough to fellowship does not occur, because although they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as sinners. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. (p. 110)

Soul friends are sinners with us, yet like the young slave girl, who knew her lord's disease, they remember for us where power is, when we have forgotten. Jesus says, *No longer do I call you servants, but friends*. Just as the slave girl was true friend to her captor, just as Naaman's servants were true friend to their master before he stomped too far away, as they called him to himself and to the power in the land, so also you are called to find, and to learn from, and be, soul friends. These have the help we need. Where are they?

In the prison at Attica one Friday morning, a man was saying, "The difference between the criminal mind and the civilian mind is, We went out to the streets without a plan. But the civilian does not put his hand to latch of the door without first having a plan, where he is going, what he is going to do." As he spoke those words, they came true to me. I was then in a relationship with no plan. I told the group that on this man's terms, I too had a criminal mind, for I was out the door with no plan. This confession was met with the simple force of their listening and questioning, which brought soul force to me. Within one day, I brought a plan to that relationship, and there was healing. These soul friends I do not forget, for I witnessed healing in the prison often. But church is not often so safe a place to be a sinner, nor so prepared to remind the unwhole where healing power is moving in the land.

In that same book, Bonhoeffer wrote this of the help we need:

"The Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him again and again when he becomes uncertain, for by himself, he cannot help himself without belying the truth. The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of

his brother; his own heart is uncertain, and his brother's is sure. . . . The Christian must bear the burden of a brother. He must suffer and endure the brother. In bearing with man, God maintained fellowship with them. It is the law of Christ that was fulfilled in the Cross. Christians must share in this law It is the fellowship of the cross to experience the burden of the other. If one does not experience it, the fellowship he belongs to is not Christian." (pp. 23, 103)

We are not well-organized for this; few churches are. When I first moved to New York, Dr. Dale Irvin was teaching a Sunday morning Bible study on the *Letter of James* at one of the city's big Presbyterian churches. I went. James is big on relationships of discipleship and accountability in the church. Dr. Irvin asked the study group how they would respond to their church forming up in groups of accountable discipleship. "No one would come," one answered, and so said they all. Look, it's easy to avoid having soul friends, for who wants to grow, if it means learning death to our old self?

We serve food to the poor, and offer clothes and showers. But do we listen to them to learn from them? They know things we need to know. We often pity the severely disabled, which keeps them at a safe distance. But they know things we need to learn. We wear these fancy gowns, like the sets of fine garments proud Naaman brought to Elisha to buy a classy healing show. But Elisha refused the garments. Jesus refused. Francis of Assisi refused. Francis, Pope of Rome, is now refusing. Should we not shed everything fancy that keeps us from learning from the poor? Why, whole cultures and nations which the powerful hold in disdain have the help we need, if we learn to take the risk of listening.

God's future comes to the church, not from best-laid plans, but from dialogue with the help we need; not from anxious arrangements with our fears, or our budgets, but from conversations with soul friends. Healing, after all, is not getting what we thought we wanted. Healing is receiving our own experience of God. That is how it worked for Naaman. The essential thing was not that he get back to being a four-star general. The essential thing is, as he declares in the verse following our reading, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel." Your healing and mine must come as Naaman's came, and as it came to the disciples, who learned to become friends, the voice of the help we need.

No longer do I call you servants, but friends. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

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*The Riverside Church
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