


THE ELISHA CYCLE
BE A CHRISTOPHER

Texts on Sunday, July 8, 2007

Galatians 6: 1-10, 2 Kings 5: 1-14

If the story we heard last Sunday belongs to the genre of master and disciple stories, this one belongs to the genre of “master and servant” stories. Both kinds of story tell how big change takes place, the kind of change that you and I hunger for—to be done with our evil habits and hangups, and be refreshed with possibility. How can real change start? In answer, a master/disciple story focuses on what the disciple needs to do, in order to learn and change. But here’s a twist: a master/servant story usually focuses on what the *master* needs to do, in order to learn and change. Both kinds of stories have something particular to say to you, for sometimes and in some ways, you are genuinely a disciple, alert to the possibility of God’s Word in your ear. But as we said last week, when discipleship is dormant, which is perhaps most of the time, you are the master of your kingdom. You are Naaman, the commander. However, we have no idea how to master our problems. You and I, we are lepers. We are unclean. We need help.

In the tradition of the Presbyterian churches, far too great an emphasis has been laid upon the sermon and its preacher as the key element in how religion might help a person in the pews. In the first centuries of the Protestant Reformation, perhaps the relationship of preaching to the pew sitter was that of master to disciple. Indeed, what other relationship could help a believer to give a sermon attentive listening for ninety minutes or more? That kind of relationship is now far in the past, but the Sunday sermon still today has the *appearance* of a master/disciple transaction. This is not helpful, for the appearance is but skin deep.

In a wonderfully exasperated lecture called “Hearing or Doing?” Rev. Juan Carlos Ortiz calls Protestant piety, given its reliance on presentation-style worship and sermon, “a speech-centered conceptual religion” incapable of teaching how to live as a disciple of Christ. He compares the sermon with a ridiculous piano lesson. Can you imagine, says he, that sixty or six-hundred people would undertake to learn to play the piano by sitting in a large room for their weekly lesson? There the teacher would proclaim, “Now, our lesson for the day,” and with masterful hands, play a beautiful selection . . .  and say to the pupils, “Very good, students. Go home and practice that. Come back next Sunday at eleven o'clock for the next lesson.” What folly, exclaims Ortiz, to elevate strong ideas as a central act of relationship to God, yet not offer a means, with practices, to integrate new teachings into our lives day by day.

So perhaps it would be clearer to see the preaching and the listener as a master/servant relationship, but with a twist: you, the listener are the master, and the preaching is the servant. It fits the facts better, for our whole culture trains the listener to judge the preaching: its length, its liveliness, its relevance, whether it’s good—never the other way around. You are the master, judging what serves you well or poorly.

But the master, though mighty, is also a leper. If the master gets from his servant only what he asks, he remains unchanged; he stays a leper. I have come to believe that through a process of downward spiraling evolution, the ordinary church system has organized itself in support of the status quo: to keep masters masters, to tame the Holy Spirit’s wild power for subverting sin and social injustice, to keep everything cooking along pretty much the same. Perhaps you have heard that blunt dismissal of the whole experience of churchy Christianity as a vaccine that people take to keep themselves from getting the disease of Christian faith. After all, it will kill you. That’s the promise.

If you who are the master of your own kingdom are curious, whether your Lord and Master has something else in mind for you besides the comfortable weekly entertainment of some lovely spiritual songs and a short sermon, then see what God's Word has in store in a master/servant story.

You and I, we are masters—but we are lepers. Our skin—the way we touch the world— is not whole. We do not love God with our whole heart, nor our neighbor as ourselves. We are not good. It is very out of fashion to talk this way, but why should we *not* think ourselves an offense to God? It offends our pride, of course, which only proves that our ego is as big as Naaman's, the commander of armies. Still, we need healing. But how?

You can find churches that will offer you a big ritual matched to your ego. Some will shout that baptism heals you. Some will say the priest has the power, and no one else. Some will call you, wobbling and tearful, down to the altar to be saved, where the preacher will come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD and wave his hands over the spot and cure you. Naaman would not have despised such rituals as such churches have on offer—big rituals for big egos in big masters. But no big change, or at least none that lasts through Monday.

"Go and wash in the Jordan seven times," says the messenger of Elisha, the prophet of God. What can this mean? Clearly, this is not a recipe from a spiritual cookbook, else we would have our own sevenfold ritual right here. But consider this. Some of you have seen the Jordan River down by Jericho. It is a muddy stream not so wide as Ellicott Creek snaking its way through a band of trees and grass between vast dry wildernesses, east and west. It is not beautiful to a master of Damascus. Asks Naaman, "Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?" And he turned and went away in a rage." This is a remarkable moment. The master has received a message and method for his healing which are perfectly clear. He, like church goers, also desires to be healed from his diseases. But he will not trust the message! His ego is in the way and he will not do it.

Now, doing the will of God is not hard; it is easy. The hard part is trusting that you *know* the will of God, that you really have heard. As Naaman stalks away in rage, he has heard God's word through Elisha only with his ears, which means nothing. Because of his ego, because of his mastery, he cannot hear a simple message from Elisha as God's word to him. You could say that his leprosy, and yours, and mine, is now *caused* by the crisis of the ego, preventing his hearing God's word within, so that he—so that we—might do it.

But Naaman still desires to be healed of his diseases. Do you? He does not want so to master all his domain that nothing in him changes. Do you? Hear then how with inward ears the master turns from rage to healing in the humble river. Who helped Naaman hear God's word, and turn? It was his own servants who prevailed upon him to listen again for the word of God, already made plain by Elisha. Indeed, it is servants first and last in this story who open God's prophetic words to be heard truly by those who usually give only outward attention to their servants. Recall that "a young girl from the land of Israel" started this whole story moving by telling Naaman's wife of the prophet in Samaria. Now at the end, the servants are saying "My father, if the prophet had commanded you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much rather, then, a small thing?" So Naaman went and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child."

What can this mean for us? For real, healing change, we need spiritual servants at hand who are willing to challenge us to recall what already we have heard of God's will for us. We are spiritual lepers who need spiritual friends when our ego resists the simple message with doubt and pride and many excuses. Where are they? Right here. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about the church in this way.

"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.

“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.”

“Bear one another’s burdens,” writes the apostle Paul, “and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” Bonhoeffer rejoins: “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. ”

I hope these are words not easy to hear—as short and simple as Elisha’s message to Naaman, or his servants’ plea. Your healing, and that of all the church, depends on your immersing yourself in serious conversation about your life, and theirs, with fellow Christians. If we are alone and apart in our sin, we are like Commander Naaman, yet with no loving servants. We cannot hear God’s word to us. A sermon can be a kind of a servant, but it is far too weak, because it does not ask you to show yourself and know yourself. Do not delay. Find a servant. Begin to train your listening ear. Be a “Christopher,” a saint who bears the burden of Christ for another. And get yourself servants who will talk back to you when you are in a rage or foolish, and say, *Go and wash and be clean*. “So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.”

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(Bonhoeffer citations are from “Life Together,” pages 110, 23, and 103.)