

THE ELISHA CYCLE  
LOVE, AND DO WHAT YOU WILL

Texts on Sunday, July 15, 2007

*Romans 14: 1-9; 2 Kings 5: 15-19*

Remember what we saw last week. We called that a “master/ servant” story, where the master—Naaman—is indeed a master, but only in the ordinary sense that you also are a master: the master ego, powerful in your domain, but unable to bring about in yourself the healing you really desire. When it comes to inner growth and inner peace—peace, not as the world gives—the ego is a 97-pound weakling. But Naaman has servants, we observed. You and I, we need servant—not domestics, but people who care about us spiritually and watch with us and speak with us as our egos twist themselves and others in pretzels of pain. Servants—soul friends, I like to say—persistently, lovingly, hopefully invite us and invite us again to go down to the river . . . where our ego may be drowned. O master of your own fate, you need servants and a dialogue like that if your dormant discipleship is to wake, and you are to rise and follow.

So Naaman was healed. That is, by grace and with a little help from his soul friends, he let his ego drown in the muddy Jordan and was refreshed. You too. But now this story dives for your whole soul, for the Spirit of God is in deadly pursuit of your ego. For now, we see Naaman, healed, dropping by Elisha’s house to pay his respects. Literally. He wants to pay the man of God off! *What? Naaman? Healed Naaman . . . or Master Naaman of the proud ego? He’s back!* How true to life this is! In the hour after you know you are made whole, your ego, like Naaman’s, reasserts itself.

Oh yes! If only the master ego can recover from that humbling experience, if only once again display its richness, its fun, its attractive features, its prestige . . . everything will be all right, and nice skin too. That utterly disorienting new relationship of creature to Creator can be set comfortably in the corner of a Sunday morning, so the ego may get on with the business of importance. Now listen: there is not any value in our getting depressed or guilty about having an ego that won’t stay dead. Focusing on how bad we are is just one more trick our ego has to keep itself center stage. But see what the man of God does.

Elisha, who stands for true religion, will accept nothing from you. Before Elisha, the ego cannot play its game. The master cannot master the situation. For the most part, religion as we practice it does not work at this deep level. In ordinary church, as in the world, we mostly display our strengths to one another—at the coffee hour, in committees, through good work. Rarely is the word heard, “I will accept from you . . . nothing.”

During my seminary training, I spent a year of field education as an assistant to the pastor of the one Presbyterian church in town. I was eager to function at a high level. Of course, I did not always do so. My pastor—and boss—perceiving the struggle I had with earning his respect through good work persisted in having me hear something I still struggle to hear deeply enough: “You are not loved here because you do good work,” he said. “You are loved because you are.” In this manner, by means of Christ-touched humans, the love of God in Christ sets out in deadly pursuit of your ego, to love you, not for any of your gifts or charms; but to declare that that winning grin, that sharp way of looking or thinking, that trademark dependability is not relevant to your being, and to your being loved. “I will accept nothing.”

*Well, then give me some dirt, says Naaman, that I may ever truly worship God. Give me dirt to kneel upon wherever I am, to be recalled to what I have become today, a servant seeing that his outward being,*

*his dependable personality, with its predictable weaknesses is an illusion of permanence and importance. Before God, I come with nothing but dirt. I am released.* Naaman's two encounters with the grace of God, these two deaths of his ego, symbolize the repeated need we have to wake and wake again from sleep to discipleship, for we will fall asleep again; but will rise again, when we hear his word.

Finally though, what is the point of the ego's breakdown? Why all this fuss over discipleship? Isn't living and working, hoping and loving, failing and smiling and dying enough, as the atheists say? Are we religious just nuts, or hypocrites, to make so much of our need of God? What is the breakdown for? What is salvation for? I know you see that if it is just to extend your stay at the Hotel Eternal, then religion and its promises would only be tools of your ego. What is it really for?

Naaman has it. Catch what he has. He is going home, over the Jordan, back to the land of the enemy, to serve his king in Syria. He is taking his mounds of dirt; that is, his meditation practice, his cross on a cord around the neck, his grace at meals, his breath prayer. But he *is* going home, back to ordinary life with ordinary relations of masters and servants where egos zip about more urgent, numerous, and complex in their demands than a thousand daily planes landing and lifting off from the busiest airport. There are many gods out there in the world you must return to.

"But may the LORD God pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the temple of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, when I do bow down there, may the LORD God pardon your servant on this one count." You see, Naaman has it. The point of his ego's breakdown is his breakthrough in freedom to love. For it is for love of his aged king, who until his death will need to lean on Naaman's arm, that Naaman, the wakeful disciple, will move through motions in the temple of a god who does not even exist. For love of his earthly master, Naaman will not resign his commission or leave his country. For love, he will not try to convert the old king, which effort would be pure arrogance. For love, he will honor his father to the day of his death. For love.

I have spent many years studying what we Christians call the Old Testament. I honor and respect the urgency of its heroes and teachers who proclaimed, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." [Yahweh elohenu, Yahweh echad]; who felt sure that "the Lord your God is a jealous God"; whose God commanded, "You shall have no other gods before me." However, this story of Naaman talking with Elisha, his master, rings the bell in the heart of monotheism even more clearly and with such joyful, surprising freedom and lightness. For Naaman has seen that when he is no longer seeking his own life, to build it up, he can love. He has seen that when he loves through the love of God, he can do whatever he wills. He is free. This is gospel, right here in our so-called Old Testament: the gospel of release into love. This is the point of your salvation, that God's love abound.

The title of our sermon today is a word from Augustine, the great fifth century teacher of the church. The "," after "Love" is critical. Not: Love and do whatever you will. But, Love, and if you are love, then whatever you will, will be right, and right with God. This is why Elisha says, "Go in peace." There are not two gods; there are not two ways for you to get to your great good; there are not two futures for your life. And the past is the past; it happened, it too is one.

What Naaman and Elisha saw, which all who trust absolutely in one God also sometimes see—when the ego is river-washed from them and they are clean, when their pride is pulled down and all their gifts and talents are set aside—is that we abide in one reality, all things unified more than ever words can say. There are no gods, it is true. There is only One; Whom we cannot name. In Jesus' perfect dying to himself, we have seen what it is like to accept all existence without resistance as belonging to the One; and to cease our maddening efforts to secure our happiness by paying duties to many gods.

You see this tragic, burdened world of unhappy souls, going into many temples, thinking they are

sources of real satisfaction. And now, in your breakdown, which is your break through, you see that you can accompany anyone anywhere in love. You see, in fact, that there is nothing else worth doing. Love, and do what you will. "Go in peace."

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