

Naaman returned to Aram (Syria) with a lot more than he had come with: “flesh restored like the flesh of a young boy,” a pardon, shalom in the parting blessing of Elisha, and two mule-loads of earth. And he still had the 10 talents of silver (750 lbs.), 6,000 shekels of gold (150 lbs.) and 10 sets of garments, because the prophet would accept nothing in exchange for curing Naaman of his leprosy.¹

How different this foray into Israel from Naaman’s previous ones. As commander of the army of Aram, he had come to raid, part of the ongoing conflict between Israel and Syria. He would have traveled light, and returned home carrying booty from Israel: at least one slave for his household, and likely much more loot for the king.

Then he had come in as an enemy; this time as a supplicant. No wonder, from his perspective and that of his king, he had to come with so great an offering. And no wonder, from the perspective of the king of Israel, the request of Aram’s king seemed like a ploy: “Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.” (5:7)

The kings, and Naaman himself, could not see beyond the context of politics as usual all the jockeying for power and influence, territory and wealth. Who could have imagined that the LORD might already be at work in the situation? The narrator sees; did you hear it? Naaman was in high favor with his king, “because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram” (5:1).

Now, as you might guess, this is a folk tale, told by a people—Israel—at a time when they were small and weak, beset by powerful, hostile neighbors, including Aram. The story was written down and maybe elaborated on when they were captive exiles in Babylon, three centuries later. There was some consolation, and also pride, in saying *if Aram (or Babylon) was victorious over us only it was only because it was the LORD’s doing*. And there was delight, of course, in a tale of a mighty enemy general humbled by a prophet of Israel. But maybe there are also deeper truths here.

The young girl, captive from the land of Israel, who served Naaman’s wife—somehow she was able to show compassion for her foreign master instead of hatred. Sure, there’s a touch of braggadocio in her words—“If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! [the Northern Kingdom of Israel, from which she came] He would cure him of his leprosy”—but, still, she didn’t keep the good news of Elisha’s powers to herself, didn’t savor Naaman’s suffering; she offered her captor a cure;

¹Actually, he took home only 8 talents and 8 sets of garments, because Elisha’s servant, Gehazi, secretly asked for two of each, and Naaman gladly gave them to him. “Secretly” as Gehazi thought, but Elisha knew, and he punished Gehazi by sending the leprosy of Naaman on him. (2 Kings 5:19b-27) Our story’s already long enough, though.

It would be another century before the prophet Micah would summarize the law:
“. . . and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love *hesed* (mercy, kindness, compassion)
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

But there it was, already, *embodied* in a young girl, deep and wide enough to extend to an enemy. She reminds me of Joseph, sold into slavery by his brothers, whose captivity in Egypt was used by God to save not only God's people—Joseph's family—but all Egypt, as well. “You meant it for evil,” Joseph told his brothers, “but God meant it for good.” (Gen. 50:20)

The LD has great powers, has done marvelous things. But perhaps the greatest of all is to open a human heart to be compassionate instead of narrow and hard, especially toward an enemy, someone who is on the other side.

So I'm wondering how things went for Naaman after he got home to Aram, with those two mule-loads of earth. He knew now “that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel. . . .”; that's why he took that earth, to have some presence of the LD with him in Aram. How did the LD's presence—which *we* know wasn't confined to those clods of soil—affect him, over time?

Perhaps, out of gratitude to her God who was now his God, Naaman let the servant girl go home. And there must have been a conversation with the king—Naaman came home cured, with most of the fortune intact. Did he keep quiet about the God of Israel and the earth? Did he, as he'd assumed, have to bow down to Rimmon, the god of Aram, god of storm and thunder? “Go in peace,” Elisha had said to him. I wonder if he ever made another raid into Israel; and, if he did not, whether he continued in high favor with his master.

Being healed, being brought into relationship with the living God, has consequences. Jesus put it like this, “Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?” (Mk. 8:37) His life—that is what Naaman was given by God through Elisha. His life—that is what the apostle Paul was given by God in Jesus Christ, what the Corinthians and all others who have come to believe in the power of God in Christ crucified and risen have been given. Life. Life freed from the power of sin and death. Life free to serve.

How much are we to let the reality of divine compassion and forgiveness change us, change our life?² For Paul, the answer is *entirely*, body and soul, thought, word, and action. Everything now is for the sake of Christ, which is for the sake of others.

Earlier in this first letter to the church at Corinth Paul has been writing about keeping appetites under control (*e.g.*, self-control in sexual behavior, not eating food offered to idols). Not asceticism for asceticism's sake, not to win God's favor, but out of consideration and compassion for others and in gratitude for God's favor.

²And, surely, there was forgiveness, pardon for Naaman in Elisha's “Go in peace,” beyond pardon in advance for bowing to the god of Aram.

The language he uses about his own self-discipline is extreme—"I punish my body and enslave it"—but consider that he is living in imitation of and for the sake of Christ, who died on the cross. For him. For you. For me. For that first century church at Corinth, some of whose members seemed to believe that, having been saved and forgiven they were free to behave any way they liked. Paul had preached to them and taught them about what God has done in Jesus. He felt responsible for them. So, yes, his language was colorful and extreme. He was trying to get their attention: *being a follower of Christ will change your life—so pay attention, and follow!*

"Walking among us he touched us with healing and transforming power." (Enriching Our Worship/National Cathedral Healing Liturgy) Walking on the road somewhere in Galilee, Jesus met a man with leprosy—a man whose life was so enveloped by the disease that he had become "a leper."

As a leper, the man was bound by law to stay away from towns and settlements, and to warn anybody who came near to stay away, crying out "Unclean! Unclean!" But he didn't. He saw that this was Jesus and begged to be made clean—cleansed of disease, made ritually clean again to be allowed back into his family and community, synagogue and temple. "If you choose . . ." he begged.

Jesus had compassion; was "moved with pity" our translation says. A mild way of putting what the Greek conveys about compassion, which in Jesus is a physical reaction as much as an emotional one. (Take note, *cf.* Paul, in Christ relationship with God and neighbors is not spiritual only but involves our whole being, all our life.) His guts were wrenched. You might say his blood boiled. He was indignant over this disease that is terrifying in its appearance and effects, that separates a leper and his community from each other, cuts off the diseased one from the means and place of worship, which was like being cut off from God.

"I do choose . . ." Jesus said, and did the unimaginable—more even than Naaman had expected from Elisha. He did not "wave his hand over the spot," but stretched out his hand and touched him. Compassion allowed him to do no less. Even though the result was, ironically, that he and the now-cleansed leper would change places, in a way: the man would be welcomed back into life in the community, where he told everyone what Jesus had done for him, which meant that Jesus "could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country/in the deserted places."

Compassion allowed him to do no less. Even though as he sent the man back to show himself to the priest to be certified as cured, "as a testimony to them," Jesus already could taste the conflict with the authorities that was to come.

As with Naaman, we do not know how things went for the man after he was cured and returned home, showed himself to the priest, made the sacrifices called for by the law. We cannot know how he may have responded to the compassion Jesus showed him. How, over time, he may have been healed, body and soul, as well as cured. How he may have seen himself, family, community differently, having once lived so far outside that circle of safety. How he, in turn, may have risked reaching out in compassion across boundaries and taboos himself.

We do so think in terms of dichotomies: enemy-friend; insider-outsider; conservative-liberal; clean-unclean; us-them. But what might God have in mind for us, with this compassion extended to enemies? Or Jesus' reaching out to touch what is unclean, that which cannot be in the presence of God? Or Paul's so fully meeting people where they are—so reaching out—that (from last week's reading from 1st Corinthians, 9:19-23) he *became* as a Jew to the Jews, *became* as one outside the law to those outside the law, *became* all things to all people, so that he might win some for Christ?

It may be that we are afraid to reach out too far, into very unfamiliar territory, to people who seem too different, who think and act differently, because we fear losing something of who we are, maybe even our central notion of "what it means to be me." What it means to be honorable, worthy, loyal. What it means to be Aramean or Israelite, American, or Irish, Australian, English, Colombian, Guatemalan, Dutch, German, Danish, Chinese, Jordanian, Burundian, Rwandan. What it means to be Christian.

This compassion of God, that extends over all places, all sorts and conditions of persons, what, oh what, might its implications for our life be?