

We have a friend who has a sermon on Naaman entitled: Seven Ducks in a Muddy River! The title puts the scene into vivid perspective.

As I was thinking about Naaman and his healing I was reminded that we all have our own images or pictures of how things were or how things should be. For example, we know how the representatives of God should act. We may even place them on pedestals, often demanding that they act or behave differently from “normal” people. Think I have shared the story of the congregation that gave its pastor a medal for being humble and then took it away from him when he wore it! Naaman had an image of how he would be healed. He had an image of what was about to happen to him and when it didn’t...

Elisha is guided by the Word and Naaman is guided by his position of power and prestige. Naaman is considered a great man. He is the General Prateaus of his day. He is the commander of the army, highly regarded by the King and the people and feared by his enemies. He is a powerful individual but... he has a skin disease, a form of leprosy. This makes him unclean, an outcast from society. As great as he is his disease diminishes what he can do in public. It limits his interaction with people.

His army has captured an Israeli slave girl and she tells her mistress, Naaman’s wife, of a healer, a prophet in Israel who is known for his healing. This message gets to Naaman and he goes to the King with the information. The King sends Naaman to the King of Israel with a message, “Here is my General, heal him.” The King of Israel is not the prophet of God. He has no ability to heal this man. He senses a trap and tears his clothes, anxious about what will happen when Naaman is not healed. However, the word reaches Elisha, the prophet, what has transpired and he sends a note to the King of Israel to have Naaman come to him.

Naaman now arrives at the home of Elisha. We have some indication of what Naaman expected, *“I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy”* (2 Kings 5:11b NIV). He wanted a spectacle, a show. When all he gets is the servant of Elisha and the directions to go and bathe seven times in the Jordan he gets angry. After all he is a great man and the Jordan is just a muddy river not worthy of him. What is the meaning of all this? He has come with men and gifts just to be told to go and wash in the Jordan. He is not yet ready to be humbled before God.

Now his servants are wiser than Naaman. They understand the situation. They asked Naaman what he would do if Elisha had asked Naaman to do some mighty deed or something great. They knew Naaman would have eagerly tried to accomplish it. But a simple bath in the Jordan? Why not? What is your healing worth? Is it not better to be humbled before God and healed?

Why this simple bathing? What would have happened if Naaman had been given some mighty task to accomplish? Might he not begin to think that it was his might and valor in accomplishing the deed, rather than the hand of God that healed him? The power is not in Naaman’s deeds or the prophet. The power is in God. Naaman has a choice. He can follow the directions of the prophet and be healed or he can remain a leper. He can be guided by the Word or by his own stubbornness.

As Paul writes to the church in Galatia he echoes the story of Naaman, *“May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been*

crucified to me, and I to the world” (6;14 NIV). Paul is not bringing glory to Paul but to God. Paul could boast (and he does in 2 Corinthians 11:16ff - though only to demonstrate the folly of boasting). However none of Paul’s accomplishments is because of Paul’s strength and power. Paul is like the rest of the church, a sinner saved by God’s grace through Christ. The power and glory of his ministry belong not to Paul but to God. Paul has been guided by the Word through the Spirit and his goal has been and is to bring glory to God. He is only pointing the way to Christ.

I also want us to note verse 10 of our passage today, *“So, then whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.”* Part of our task is to make the world a better place for ALL people. This does not exclude the body of believers but includes those outside the body of faith. God’s love is for the whole world not just one people or nation. Our actions should be conducted for the good of the world – we are stewards of the whole world. **We are an exclusive community open to all.** We are simply – together, one by God’s grace, lest any of us should boast.

Paul knows the folly of boasting. We begin to think it is through our own power and resources that we are accomplishing our mission. These past few weeks have had a number of politicians coming before the cameras and apologizing for “padding” their resumés. For boasting in accomplishments that were not theirs. Wonder why we think in this world where histories can be so easily researched how we can get away with mis-speaks in such things.

However, the world often spills over into the church. We claim too much honor and glory for ourselves. We do not save—only God has that capability. We are only those who point the way to the One who can. This is what God has done for me and this is where you can discover the depths of God’s love, grace, peace and forgiveness. It is not the church that saves— it is our God who underpins our very foundations.

Like Naaman we also want a show. Could God not do something spectacular and show the world power and majesty? Could Elisha not have come out and danced around Naaman and chanted some powerful words and waved his hands and healed Naaman? Yes. But did God? No! God could have done something to show the world how honored God was that Naaman had come – but we all stand as equals before God. God simply asks Naaman to go to the Jordan and bathe. When Naaman comes to his senses, he follows the word of the prophet and is healed lest he should boast – Seven Ducks in a Muddy River!

As we come to this Table today we are reminded of God’s grace – we come to a Table that is open to all. We may have lost the powerful impact that this Table had in Paul’s day. Divisions have come down. At this Table are men and women, slave and free, Jew and Gentile – God’s grace is apparent on every face. Naaman, Paul, Elisha, you and I are also a part of this Table. We are all here sharing the breaking of the bread, the drinking of the cup – not because we are worthy but because of what Christ did on the Cross, lest any of us should boast.

NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1985
NRSV, Division of Christian Education, NCC, 1989

Guided By the Word
II Kings 5:1-47
Galatians 6:7-16

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