

**A Sermon Preached at St. Christopher's Church,  
Oak Park, IL, on the Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany,  
February 12, 2012 (Year B) by the Rev. Paris Coffey**

*Elisha sent a messenger to (Naaman), saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!" . . . But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?"* **2 Kings 5:10-11 & 13**

Retired police officer and self-employed locksmith, T.F. Stern, tells the story of a woman who called the shop one day, saying that she'd locked herself out of her car. Stern was an apprentice at the time – working virtually for free – but every now and then he'd get paid for some job that the boss refused to do. This was one of those jobs, since it was closing time – the end of yet another long, hot Houston day. What's worse, the job was in a town an *hour* from the shop, which meant the boss awarded this one to his capable apprentice.

Stern was *not* overly thrilled, to say the least, and so before he left he called the woman back to ask what she had tried. Had she checked all of the windows? Were any of them open at least a little? Had she tried the other doors, but all that she would answer was, "My *keys* are **LOCKED** in my *car*!" She was clearly annoyed, so off Stern went, arriving an hour later at a car park where a self-important woman in a three piece business suit leaned against her Lexus. Her makeup – melting in the Houston sun – slid down her face, and she seemed ready to explode.

Stern walked around the car to test its handles, while the woman waited with annoyance. "It never hurts to try the simplest thing," he joked, annoying her even more, until the handle of rear door on the passenger turned quietly and the door stood open. "That's not possible!" the woman stammered, as a smile began to spread across Stern's face. He later wrote, "I tried to hide it, but it was already out there," prompting his customer to *finally* look a little sheepish. "I'm *not* going to charge you for the lock out," Stern said affably, "(But) not telling anyone your name – that's worth the price . . . wouldn't you say?" The woman paid in cash,<sup>1</sup> her pride transformed into humility, which may well be how Naaman *also* felt, discovering the hard way in today's first reading that indeed "it never hurts to try the simplest thing."

T. F. Stern, the teller of this locked-car tale, titled his anecdote, "The Human Condition." It's a title apropos to Naaman, too, for what's more human than pride,

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<sup>1</sup> T. F. Stern, "The Human Condition," *The Moral Liberal*, February 9, 2012, <http://www.themoralliberal.com>.

which often makes life much harder than it needs to be. Granted, Naaman's life is not a breeze; he has leprosy. It's *not* the hard life of most lepers, though, for Naaman has community. Typically leprosy – which included a variety of skin diseases deemed highly contagious – banished those afflicted from community. Such was the Law, which branded lepers as unclean/untouchable and sentenced them to isolation.

Certainly this is the case with the leper in today's Gospel, who violates the Law to risk the healing touch of Jesus. Naaman, on the other hand, has *not* been banished – at least not yet – and so still has community support. He has support from his wife, from his wife's Israeli slave, and even from the King. In fact, the King highly values this leader of his country's army, as today's first reading makes clear. "Naaman, commander of the army of the King . . .," reads our Old Testament text, "was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory . . ."

*God* has given victory to an unbeliever and the King is grateful. Consequently when a young slave girl captured from Israel says that there's a prophet in Samaria who can heal Naaman, the King acts quickly. He sends his general to Israel with 750 pounds of silver, 150 pounds of gold, ten sets of clothes, horses, chariots, and a letter to Israel's King saying, "Know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." Not surprisingly, Israel's king is dismayed. He has no power to heal; but God does, which the prophet Elisha knows. "Let him come to me," Elisha says, "that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel," and Israel's King sighs with relief.

He sends Naaman to Elisha's house, but the prophet isn't home. At least he doesn't come to the door, but sends his servant instead to tell Naaman – who waits outside Elisha's house with an army of men, horses and chariots – to go wash in the muddy Jordan seven times to be made clean. Naaman feels humiliated! He's a great warrior with a great army, and *THIS* is the treatment he gets? How rude! No prophet, no flowing robes, no show of power . . . but a *servant* with ridiculous directions. Such directions are for simpletons: go wash in the Jordan indeed! There are cleaner rivers back at home. Next thing you know, this flimflam prophet/healer will aspire to sell some easy mark the Brooklyn Bridge.

"Well," thinks Naaman, "it won't be me," much as we think, too, when someone says, "Don't worry. I'm praying for you. You're not alone. God is with you." We imagine words like this to be too simple – to be naïve – since 21<sup>st</sup> century life is complicated. We *know* what makes things work – or fail to work. We can explain the human body and the brain. We understand the earth, the heavens and the sea; and know what causes rain, produces growth and generates the light. Things were simpler in Jesus' day, we conclude as we read healing stories like today's, much

like Naaman may have thought, berating himself for listening to a servant girl. “*Why* did I allow myself such foolish hope?” he might have scolded himself, denying any possibility that something as simple as washing in a river could make a difference.

The truth, though, is that life’s real miracles – its healing moments, cleansing acts and glimpses of wonder – are often in the simplest of things. In the birth of a baby, for example, or beauty of a sunset. In familiar church hymns or the faint fragrance of incense. In a grilled sandwich accompanied by Campbell’s Tomato Soup. Or in a loved one’s embrace or encouraging words. God’s healing touch can be in the simplest of things, as most of us knew when we were children, but may have lost along the way.

When we were growing up, for instance, fireflies on a summer’s evening could light up our nights, while snowy mornings with even the *possibility* of no school could send hope soaring. Penny-candy from the neighborhood store, paid for with empty soda bottles, tasted like nectar from God. Hiking in the woods, building a tree house or playing ball in the street was as close to heaven as anything. And eating popcorn with family in front of TV or hotdogs after church on Sunday could cure whatever ills one had. God was great; life was good, and doing simple things felt sacred – not *unlike* Naaman I imagine – when he eventually gets down from his high horse to do the simple task Elisha has suggested.

He washes in the River Jordan and comes clean, although not until his servants beg him. “Father,” they say to Naaman, using a term of affection. “If the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash, and be clean’?” Sometimes the simplest things are best, and sometimes God is closest there. “Look for my cleansing Spirit/healing touch in simple things,” says God, for life is *not* as difficult as humans make it out to be. Indeed, the door is open. It always was. It has never been locked, as Naaman found when he walked through it and was healed, and as we will find if we just turn the handle quietly and let the door stand open. *Amen.*