

# Who Has the Power?

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**Third Presbyterian Church**  
**July 3, 2016 (Seventh Sunday after Pentecost)**  
**2 Kings 5:1-14**

Naaman, mighty warrior, jewel of the Aramaean war machine, stood before the King of Israel. He stood before the enemy king whose army he had vanquished in earlier battles. Naaman stood before his royal adversary with every diplomatic tool available to him – hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of silver, gold, clothing, and a letter from his own king with an impossible request – cure Naaman of his leprosy.

Like many diseases today, leprosy was no respecter of persons. A great army commander could lead the charge on the battlefield. He could command the respect of his troops with a piercing look and the nod of his head. He could captivate a party with tale after tale of his wartime exploits. He could even get an impromptu audience with his royal majesty. A powerful military man was hard-core; invincible, even; the fiercest enemy could not fell him. But an embarrassing, contagious skin disease called leprosy could. For leprosy was not only physically uncomfortable, it isolated its subject from community. That may have even been the worst part – the isolation the disease brought with it. Who wants to be around a leper?

I imagine Naaman visited all the health care providers in his hometown to see if any one of them could relieve his suffering. He probably answered all of their glossy magazine advertisements for miracle cures. Perhaps one of those incantations or charms or ritual dances would make those nasty lesions on his skin go away. He may have even paid a small fortune in his pursuit. But to no avail. Money and status and power can get you a lot in this world, but not everything. Not everything.

So he found himself here, pleading for help from the enemy king, because of something a slave girl had said. Of all things, he was here because of a girl who'd been captured and hauled off from her homeland of Israel during a military invasion. The girl was nothing more than the spoils of war, so we don't even know her name. Then for reasons I will never understand, she cared enough about his condition to volunteer a life-changing piece of information – that Israel's prophet Elisha could heal him. She could have suppressed that crucial tidbit; she could have kept silent. But she didn't; she knew he needed healing.

So he listened to her suggestion. Naaman surely must have been at wit's end, for why else would the captor take the word of the captive? Why else would the native-born take the word of the foreigner? Why else would the elder male take the word of the younger female? Why would the powerful take the word of the powerless? Desperate times do indeed call for desperate measures.

As if that weren't enough, how could the fiercest of the fierce venture back to enemy territory and expect he'd receive a hospitable welcome, let alone be healed? A favorable outcome is by no means a given. He had to have known the panic and diplomatic tensions that the letter would cause Israel's king: "I know what's going on," the king must have thought. "They're trying to pick a fight with me; they know I'm not God; they know I can't cure him. I know I can't cure him. They're just looking for an excuse to raid our country again."

Any pretense of power *any* of them had was a sham in the face of this disease. Score: Leprosy 1; two royal rulers plus one decorated soldier – zero.

And then word came from the prophet Elisha, "Send this leprous man to me." Which is what the young slave girl said in the first place. The king had a reprieve.

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That feeling of "I'm not God; I'm not able to help you to the extent you need" is one I often personally experience in my role here in this urban setting, at the intersection of those who have much and those who have little. We face the leprosy of our world when far more people in great need come for help than we can ever possibly serve. They come with complex concerns that defy simple solutions. They come when they don't know where else to turn – for food, financial assistance, a listening ear, a word of hope, and a word of prayer.

So we help where we can, offering prayer because it is one of our unique callings as a community of faith. It means something, I can tell you that. And we offer a bit of food and other emergency help. And that means something, too. We work to change systems that we can.

And more times than not I know that whatever response we can possibly give is inadequate to the need. It helps, **and** we're not God. We try to connect them with other services that are better prepared for their unique needs. So often we are ill-equipped – evidence of our own leprosy of sorts, and our efforts sometimes can't go far enough.

And sometimes they are just enough – sometimes we are able to direct them to one like Elisha - to the people and places that truly hold promise of healing their ills. Rarely do we know how it turns out. We are powerless to know, and it's probably just as well, or we might be debilitated by the leprosy of our own pride.

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"Send this leprous man to me," said Elisha. Naaman went to Elisha's home with all the trappings of a national hero - chariots spit and polished, horses groomed, a full military entourage in waiting. In great anticipation, Naaman waited for Elisha to wave his magic wand, make the leprosy disappear, and restore him to community. And instead, Elisha said, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and you'll be healed."

Wash in the Jordan? The dirty, filthy Jordan River? According to God's prophet, he needed to do one thing and one thing only to be healed – wash in the Jordan River seven times. That's it. One thing. But in Naaman's eyes, that's the enemy's river. "I want my river!" Insulted, angry, disgusted, Naaman refused to do the one thing he needed to do.

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How often do we ourselves refuse to do the one thing that's necessary to be healed of our own leprosy, many of which are hidden below the surface, not visible to the naked eye? We will do everything else. We will sulk and rant and rave. We will self-medicate rather than deal with tough issues or fractured relationships. We will run away from that which scares us. We will blame the victim rather than confront our own prejudice. We will bury secrets that keep us from moving into open and honest communication with those we love. We will avoid conflict altogether rather than seek to understand other ways of seeing the world. We will tough it out during a difficult time rather than risk vulnerability and ask for help. We will even look for a secular Savior to ease our fears of the future, rather than look to the source of Creation itself.

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Our leprosy transcends the individual and extends to the communal. In these turbulent times, this Old Testament story also resonates with today's national and international tensions. Did you notice that Naaman is from Syria, one of the hotbeds of violence around the world even today. And so many of our human responses to violence employ more violence. We refuse to do the

things we need to do to build stability and growing opportunity in these nations. And then we resist offering hospitality to those who flee.

This Independence Day weekend, Adriene Thorne wrote provocatively of what she calls our nation's moral leprosy. She reinterprets today's story of Naaman, substituting our own country, as follows: *Now the United States of America was commander of the free world. She was a great country, in her own sight and in the sight of others, highly regarded, because through her the Lord had given victory. She was a valiant warrior, but she had leprosy.*

Thorne continues this lengthy quote: *It is evident in ongoing [political tensions](#). It is in the sickness of a nation that does little but pray in the face of the [Orlando](#) massacre. It is in the [fear and vitriol directed at refugees](#) who are trying to save their family's lives. Our country is great, and our great country is sick.*

*We need healing from the disfiguring moral leprosy of "better than." My political viewpoint is right. My faith is true. My country is best. The illness that plagues us crosses partisan lines. It includes people of faith. It includes "[the nones](#)." Moral leprosy is blemishing our best ideals, our best faith, our best selves. It infects us, whether we arrogantly place our affinity group above all others, or apathetically fail to [speak and act](#) against those who do. Caught in the festering wound that pits God's children against one another, we are called to make the fetid mess right. We are called to heal.<sup>1</sup> End quote.*

You may agree with her assessment of our nation, or you may not. Either way, I hear in Thorne's words a deep call for humility, a call to prayerfully examine our own leprosy, a call for us to find the healing of our own wounds that can only come when we participate in the healing of others. For the body is not whole until all parts of the body are whole. One is not whole until the entire community is whole. In God's economy, one is not fully healed until all are fully healed.

Look at how many people God used in Naaman's quest for healing. His wife. Her servant girl. Not one, but two kings. A messenger. More servants. And a prophet – a prophet who was willing to bear the soldier's anger and instruct him to wash seven times in the Jordan River. Wash seven times, evoking the seven days of God's creation in the Genesis story. Wash seven times in the waters that would one day be the waters of Jesus' baptism. Wash in the waters of your adversary's river, where Godly creativity culminates in the healing that Naaman so desperately wants.

I wonder about the rest of the story, the part that's not told in the book of Second Kings. I wonder how all those other people, through their involvement in Naaman's healing, found healing of their own. I have a hunch that they did. The witness of Scripture is that God's desire for healing crosses the boundaries of nation, of class, of power, of any human category of difference.

And I wonder about the rest of our story. Where in helping to heal others might we find a measure of our own healing? Where in connecting with others might our lesions wash away, and bring us out of isolation? Where might our own healing lead to the healing of all nations?

Wash, wash in the healing waters of the River of God. Wash and be clean. Wash and be healed. Wash and be whole.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.onscripture.com/moral-leprosy>