

“Healing Courage”  
Sermon by Oby Ballinger  
Edina Morningside Community Church; November 4, 2018

**2 Kings 5:1-15a**

*Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "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." But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel."*

*So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, 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! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. 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?'" So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.*

*Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel..."*

*The War of the Worlds* is a British science fiction novel that famously describes a battle between Martian invaders and the people of Earth. The aliens have far superior technology, and can totally destroy whatever human force comes against them. Their giant walking machines trample human tanks and artillery. They overrun the entire countryside and are on the verge of bulldozing London. But just as all hope is lost, these great alien machines squeal to a stop, and their crunching mechanical arms fall limp. When people knock over one of the machines, they find its occupants dead in the cockpit. What killed them? By the end of the story, we learn it was tiny bacteria—all the organisms in the air—that killed the Martians because they had no immunity. Who would have thought something so invisible could save the planet? Deliverance comes through something small.

If it weren't for the small characters in today's Bible story, Naaman would still have leprosy. All the action begins because of something said by a Hebrew girl child. She is a trophy of war, a captive in Naaman's house and a servant to his wife. She is a female foreign servant child, which makes her as noteworthy as wallpaper to Naaman. But she's critically important to God, who uses her voice to bring about his healing. She tells her mistress, Naaman's wife, about a prophet in Israel who can heal Naaman's leprosy. The general's wife tells Naaman, who asks the king for permission to go find healing in Israel, and the action ensues. The Hebrew servant girl doesn't even have a name in the Bible, but her compassionate remark sets everything else in motion.

Contrast this with Naaman. He is anything but small, this great commander of the armies of Aram. When he comes to the prophet Elisha's home, he arrives with a great train of goods—gold and silver and fine clothes, fitting for a general. And he expects something grand in return. He wants Elisha to hold up his arms, and in a dramatic voice call on the power of Almighty God. There will be magical spells of holy words, the moving of hands over his wounds, and in a miracle he will be healed! But Elisha doesn't even come out to meet Naaman. He sends this message through a servant: "Meh. Go wash in the River Jordan and you'll be healed." There *is* a promise of healing in Elisha's words, but it's not the kind of healing that Naaman is looking for. Nothing about the prophet Elisha's command lives up to Naaman's grand expectations. Even the shallow Jordan River is not half as good as the ones where he is from. So Naaman storms away, determined to find a more impressive healing.

It is other unnamed servants who convince Naaman to actually do what Elisha said. "If the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult," they say, "would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was 'Wash, and be clean'?" Healing doesn't require extravagance and astonishment. God often works through ordinary ways and ordinary people. It's the humble servants of Naaman—the unnamed people—who point us in this direction.

Consider the same in our own American experience. Chances are, when you hear stories about our country's history, they will be about great people doing great things long ago. George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Harriet Tubman, Susan B. Anthony, and Martin Luther King, Jr. These are great Americans to be sure, but they are just the tip of the iceberg. Underneath the waters of forgotten history are countless others who have made it possible for America to be what we are today. What are the names of the soldiers who died in the American Revolution? The families who sheltered fugitive slaves on the Underground Railroad? The people who marched for women's right to vote? The students who were arrested in nonviolent protests against segregation? The migrant laborers who marched with Cesar Chavez for fair working conditions? The transgender women of color who resisted arrest at the Stonewall Inn, and thus began the modern LGBT equality movement? We do not know who most of *these* people were, overlooked as they are in the history of the "greats". But God knows their names. And God has been using ordinary, small people like them to move this country toward greater equality throughout our history. More often than not, everyday servants have been the ones to point the way to healing for this great and blemished country.

As we approach Election Day this week, the efforts of ordinary people continue. None of us here, for instance, are going to be legendary generals or national leaders. But we don't need to have our faces carved on Mount Rushmore in order to point people in the direction of healing. We can serve God's purpose in our country without doing something grand. God calls us to courageous, ordinary acts of citizenship that make civic healing possible. This week, it is about voting based on faith in what's possible rather than fear of the Other, electing candidates who most support the common good. It's also about moving beyond a personal joy or grief in Tuesday's results, and searching for ways we can build common understanding with someone who voted for "the other side". It's about teaching our children to value equality, diversity and freedom. It's about spending our money to support companies that mirror those values. It's about finding our voices to oppose hate speech, and the courage to stand with those whose lives are threatened for who they are.

From the perspective that only considers great accomplishments by great people, none of these individual acts look very impressive. But if humble servants can help Naaman find healing from leprosy, and if ordinary citizens have the power to shape the leadership of this nation, then the official record of the notable "greats" isn't what matters most. God saves instead through small people and everyday actions. What we are enlisted in as citizens and Christians is more than governmental, social, or policy change. Our civic, public and neighborly engagement is sacred work, the small, transformative movements of God's Spirit to heal this world. Let us be the servants whom God uses to point the way.