

A Sermon
‘The Power of Obedience’
Dr. Russ Seger
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SCRIPTURE: Mark 1: 40-45

And a leper came to him beseeching him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. And he sternly charged him, and sent him away at once, and said to him, "See that you say nothing to any one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to the people." But he went out and began to talk **freely** about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

CHILDREN'S SERMON

Can you all pretend? I want you to pretend this morning that we're sitting in a woods and all around us are these big trees. It's dark and we have this big fire right here. I'm going to tell you a story. Remember you are to pretend that we're out in the woods and we're sitting around a campfire and we'll let these people listen in. Okay?

I learned this story as a little boy and I thought it was a great story then. And I think it's a wonderful story now. It's a little bit long but good stories are sometimes.

Naaman was a general in the army under the king of Syria. He was important to his master. In fact, his master held him in highest esteem because it was because of him that they had victory.

Now, Naaman was a truly great man but he was afflicted by a terrible, terrible skin disease. It so happened that one night on one of the raiding parties...they were in a little community and they captured a young girl. This young girl became the maid to Naaman's wife. One day she said to her mistress, "If only my master could meet the prophet of **Samaria**, he would be healed of his skin disease."

Naaman went **straight** to his master and reported what the little girl from Israel had said. "Well, go then," said the King of Syria, "and I'll send a letter of introduction to the King of Israel." So he went off and he carried with him seven hundred and fifty pounds of silver and a hundred and fifty pounds of gold and ten sets of clothes.

Naaman delivered the letter to the King of Israel. The letters said, "When you get this letter, you will know that I have personally sent my servant, Naaman, to you and you are to heal him of his skin disease.

When the King of Israel **read** this letter, he was terribly upset. In fact, he was so upset that he ripped his garments to pieces and said, "Am I God? Can I do this healing? Am I a God that I have this kind of power of life and death? What am I supposed to do when I get orders **from** this king to heal? What's going on here anyhow? I think the king is trying to pick a fight."

The King of Israel was very upset. **Elisha**, a man of God, heard of the king's distress and so he went to him. He said to him, "Why are you so upset, whipping up your robes like this? Send Naaman to me so he'll learn that there is a prophet in Israel."

So Naaman with his horses and his chariots arrived in style at **Elisha's** door. **Elisha** sent out a servant to meet him with this message. "You go to the River Jordan and immerse

yourself seven times and if you do it seven times, your **skin** will be **as** white as snow and you will be healed good as new."

Naaman heard this and he lost his temper and he turned on his heel and said, "I have personally come out here to meet **with the** prophet and he sends me this little pipsqueak that tells me that I am supposed to go get washed in this muddy, ugly, dirty river called Jordan and I will be healed on the spot. The rivers where I came from are much cleaner than these. If that's all that it takes, I could have stayed in Damascus. I'm not going to bathe in one of those." And he stomped off, mad as a **hornet**.

But one of his servants caught up with him and said, "Father, if the prophet had asked you to do something hard and heroic, you would have done it. Isn't this pretty easy? Couldn't you just try it? Couldn't you just stretch yourself a little bit and make it happen?"

So he did. He went down and immersed himself in the Jordan River. He went down seven times and do you know what happened? He was cleansed! Absolutely made perfectly well. He was as good as new. So he went back to the holy man, **Elisha**, and he stood before him and he said, "I know now without a shadow of doubt that there is no God in the world that could get the best of your God. In my gratitude I want to give you a **gift**."

"As God lives", **Elisha** said, "I can't take anything from you." Naaman tried his best to get **Elisha** to take something but he wouldn't. "If you won't take anything" Naaman said to **Elisha**, "then let me ask you a favor. Will you give me a load of dirt, **as** least as much dirt as a team of donkeys can carry? Because when I go back to Damascus, I never again want to worship on the ground of the **kings** and the gods of Syria. I want to be able to build my own little mound of dirt where I can stand in God's presence."

Elisha said, "Do that. Go in peace. Everything will be alright." So Naaman left. He had how many pounds of silver? 750. And how many pounds of gold? 150 pounds of gold.

And how many outfits did he have? 10. Just wanted to make sure you were listening. So he took off and he had all of the gold and all of the silver and all of his clothes with him.

One of **Elisha's** servants said, "He's getting off for nothing. My master healed him and it didn't cost him a dime. That stinks! So he went after him and caught him out on the plain. Naaman got out of his chariot and asked, "What do you want?" The servant said, "You know I think the master has changed his mind and would you give him a little bit for his trouble?"

Naaman said, "Sure." The servant said, "Will you give us 75 pounds of silver and some gold and a couple sets of clothes?" Naaman, being so **grateful**, said, "I'll do better than that. I'll double that." And he did.

Now the servant took the money in a sack and he took the clothes back with him. When they got almost back to where **Elisha** was, the servant hid the gold and the silver and the clothes. Then he returned to **Elisha**. **Elisha** said, "Wow, Gehazi, what have you been up to?"

"Oh, not much." **Elisha** said, "Didn't you know that I was with you in spirit when the man stepped out of his chariot to greet you? Tell me, is this the time to look after yourself lining your own pockets with gifts? Guess what, Gehazi? The skin disease that Naaman had will now **affect** you and your family and there will be no relief in sight."

And Gehazi walked away with his skin flaky and white. Now, what do you make of the story?

When I was growing up in Sunday School, folks, no one ever told us the second half of that story. Did you ever hear the second half of that story? I always heard just the part about **Naaman** getting healed. But I didn't hear the part of the story about Gehazi, the servant.

You know one of the things that I think the story says. We can't really buy God's gifts. And I think that **Elisha** knew that and understood it and he knew that if he took something for a **gift** that really wasn't his in the first place, that he was overstepping his bounds. And I think that's a good lesson for us to understand and know. Some of things that we have to give each other are just gifts and we can't expect anything in return. Well, the fire is going down. Are you getting cold? Thank you kids.

This week on Monday I went to **Scottsbluff** to listen to a renowned **preacher/teacher** by the name of Bill Sloan **Coffin**. Bill Coffin was actively involved in the '60's in the anti-war movement. He was the pastor at Yale and for a number of years was pastor of the Riverside UCC Church in New York City, He was truly and is truly a prophetic voice. He was speaking to us **from** his hospital room because he has pneumonia. It was a two hour workshop. After about 47 or 48 minutes he said to us, "I have to give up. I can't talk anymore." But he had said some remarkably **wonderful** things and some kind of **frightening** things as well about the state of our world. I think he was being truly prophetic. On Thursday we learned that they put Bill in hospice. The care that he is going to be getting from this point on is not curative, but palliative. Bill is dying.

But what he said to us about the world and about the state of our world and what he described as the 'axis of evil' being the people in the world who have an insensitivity to the needs of the rest of the world. that the real heart of evil lies when we become so selfish and so self-centered that we do not see that 90% of our world is without. I thought about that in terms of communion this morning. It's pretty easy to sit in this place and drink a little cup of juice and peel off a piece of bread and think about the blessings that we have in life.

But what if that was all you had to eat today? If that was the only nourishment that you might have in a whole 24 hour period? So, this morning, when you come to the table, I want you to think about 9 in 10 people in our world not having what we have. And think about sharing your cup with someone who doesn't have it, and sharing your bread with someone who has nothing to eat. Maybe communion needs to open ~~our~~ eyes to the pain of the rest of the world, **not** just to the **joy** of knowing God in **our** lives.

SERMON

I want you to hear this morning as I talk, the power of death, the power of endings, because without death there isn't resurrection. Without letting go of what we thought we knew and what we thought we held so dearly and so clearly in our hands, if we don't let go of it, if we don't **begin** to revision it, **churches** all over **America** will be shutting their doors. This one could too.

Now I don't hear that as negative. I hear it as remarkably **powerful**. The reason that I say that is because the story of Mark and the story of **Elisha** has some **wonderful**

parallels, some wonderful connections. To understand this you have to know (over the last month or so I've been trying to put this into context for you) that Israel was dying when Jesus was born. The Hebrew faith, the culture that the Hebrews had known and come to love and appreciate, that had guided them through many ups and downs in their lives, was dying. In fact, within 30 years of Jesus' death, Israel as they knew it for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years, would be no more. And the people would no longer be there. Their beloved city, Jerusalem, was in total ruin.

The Romans, when they took Jerusalem by storm, tore down all of its buildings and most all of its wall. They just decimated it. That's what they did in those days. We might call it carpet bombing in our day and age. They destroyed everything. And the Hebrews who survived, migrated. They left and they went to the land of their enemies, the Syrians, to survive. It's that context that the Gospels were written in. And the Gospel writers I think were trying to say to the people then, "God's not dead. Your rituals are gone. Your place of worship is gone. Sacrifice is gone as you understand it and know it, but God is still alive. God still loves you. God still cares deeply about his people and wherever you are and whoever you are, you are loved."

Now, how do the writers get at that? Well, in the story of second Kings, **Elisha**, if you remember **from** my sermon last Sunday, was a type of Christ. Elijah, John the Baptist. **Elisha**, a type of Christ. What is the miracle of **Elisha**? He heals Naaman of leprosy. What is the miracle of Jesus? He heals the man **from** leprosy. Do you see the parallels? Do you see the connectedness? Now we could go through those two passages of Scripture and find several more parallels, connections that would help us to understand. What I think the Kings story is telling us and the Mark story is telling us is that God loves people everywhere. If you were going to talk about God loving everyone, who would you pick? Your neighbor? Your spouse? Your kids? Of course not. If you wanted to tell a story about God really loving everybody, you'd pick your enemy...I mean the ugliest, nastiest human being on earth.

Naaman was that to the Hebrews. He was the favorite general of Syria's ruler because he was so good at what he did. Now, what do generals do? They make war. He got out there and he got sick and so he goes to the Hebrew God for healing. And **Elisha** tells him to do something, and **after** this wonderful little struggle that we have on the inside, Naaman does it. If someone tells you to do something good for you what do you think? You jump right up and do it, right? Sherrill tells me how to lose weight. I'd be healthy, I'd feel better. I've heard that all my life since I've grown up. (I was just teasing Sherrill). And I think that I can get around it all sort of ways.

Why would I go to Israel to dunk myself in a dirty river when I could do it in the White River? You see, Naaman was an outsider. He didn't understand and he didn't know the ways of the Hebrews. He didn't understand the significance of all those stories but he listened and he obeyed and he was healed and he was transformed. He was an outsider looking in.

The same story in a sense is true for the leper that is healed by Jesus. Sir, if you would, you could make me whole. And Jesus saw something pretty remarkable about that. He reached out and he touched him and he was whole. He says to the leper, 'Wow go, do what you're supposed to do and don't tell a soul.' Now that's paradoxical intent if I've ever heard of it. If something really good happens to you, what are you going to do? Are you going to hide it? I think not.

But **the essence** of the story is that the leper in the New Testament was the same kind of outsider that **Naaman** was in the Old Testament. He didn't fit in the system. He wasn't a part of the elite. He wasn't a member in good standing but he understood and knew something of the power of God in the world. And it transformed him.

I think what is going on in the American Church and I think the church around the world is that we too are in a crisis state where we may no longer be able to support the plants, the edifices that we have built around us. We may not be able to be in a building like this for much longer, simply because it takes so much to keep it up. We may not be able to support some twenty churches in a community of 5000...the physical plants. And we have to think realistically about that. We have to begin to think 'outside the box' as it were and consider ourselves a people of faith that recognizes that when what we have known and what we've become comfortable with and what is sought, starts to fall away, we need not lose our faith, that the community can continue to grow and that we can get past the ideas of sectarianism and those people that we have often considered our enemies, even though they might be on the other side of the street, worshiping in another place, our people that God loves too.

It seems to me that it is time for our church, the **Chadron** UCC Church, to think very seriously about what our mission is and be willing to risk who we are to share the Good News that God loves the outsider.

The second half of that story is as important as the first...the story I read to the children. Do you remember Gehazi, the servant? He thought he was privileged. He thought that because he was the servant of **Elisha** that he could get something for **Elisha's** work. So he followed **Naaman** into the wilderness and asked him for a handout. **Elisha** flatly refused to take a gift. But Gehazi was deeply committed to getting something for nothing.

It seems to me that that is sometimes the way insiders act. I have what I need and I want more. I have **everything** that is humanly necessary but I just want a little bit more. When I see a 'freebie' I go after it. What Gehazi didn't understand was that his dishonesty would cost him. In psychological circles we **often** recognize that the very things that people **try** to disown, **try** to not understand or not deal with, **are** the very things that trap them and catch them.

This says something to me about the church as well. We **are** a people that often times **are** very self-centered, very caught up in what we think is the right thing to do, and Boy! We ought to be rewarded for it. **Elisha** understood that to take the gift from **Naaman** would

put him in a bad way. The church has to understand in our day and our age that we have to move past this idea of privilege....that WE ARE ALL Gods people and until all God's people feel the loving and caring and healing Hand of God, all of us will suffer.

We might be dying, but resurrection is coming. Amen.