

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

Year B
RCL



2 Kings 5:1-14

Mark 1:40-45

Psalm 30

The Collect

O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you:
Mercifully accept our prayers; and because in our weakness we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your grace, that in keeping your commandments we may please you both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

2 Kings 5:1-14

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 quar-

rel 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.

Psalm 30 Page 621, BCP

Exaltabo te, Domine

- 1 I will exalt you, O LORD, because you have lifted me up and have not let my enemies triumph over me.
- 2 O LORD my God, I cried out to you, and you restored me to health.
- 3 You brought me up, O LORD, from the dead; you restored my life as I was going down to the grave.
- 4 Sing to the LORD, you servants of his; give thanks for the remembrance of his holiness.
- 5 For his wrath endures but the twinkling of an eye, his favor for a lifetime.
- 6 Weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning.
- 7 While I felt secure, I said, "I shall never be disturbed. You, LORD, with your favor, made me as strong as the mountains."
- 8 Then you hid your face, and I was filled with fear.
- 9 I cried to you, O LORD; I pleaded with the Lord, saying,
- 10 "What profit is there in my blood, if I go down to the Pit? will the dust praise you or declare your faithfulness?"
- 11 Hear, O LORD, and have mercy upon me; O LORD, be my helper."
- 12 You have turned my wailing into dancing; you have put off my sack-cloth and clothed me with joy.
- 13 Therefore my heart sings to you without ceasing; O LORD my God, I will give you thanks for ever.

Mark 1:40-45

A leper came to Jesus begging him, and kneeling he said to him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

SERMON

The ability to deal with our enemies with compassion seems to have evaporated from our very understanding. However often Scripture shows us people acting under the influence of God approaching others with compassion, even enemies, we much prefer the easier course of demonizing those that oppose us, then opposing the forces of the demon thus created with all the force of our own self-righteousness. Not surprisingly, this does not end well, as a general rule.

Naaman is a general in the army of Aram, the country we would call Syria. To the south of Aram was Israel, the northern kingdom. To the south of Israel was Judah. Aram was then, as Syria is now, periodically at hostilities with Israel. During one of those periods of hostility, Naaman kidnapped a young Israelite girl as spoils of war, and hauled her back to Syria to serve his

wife.

Naaman, we now learn, has become a leper, from which we should not assume that he suffers from Hansen's Disease. For people of this time, any skin problem was referred to as leprosy. The disease might be different from our understanding, but the emotional reaction is the same. From the frequency with which they are mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures, though, I think it's safe to say that any skin condition, no matter how benign to our eyes, was viewed with considerable horror through their eyes. A great general can't instill determination and bravery in his troops if his appearance provokes revulsion. For Naaman, this is a big problem, and for the king of Aram as well, since Naaman is a valuable and successful general.

The characters we have in this story are, then, the king of Aram, the king of Israel, a slave girl kidnapped

from her home and forced into servitude, and, waiting in the shadows, the prophet Elisha, the receiver of Elijah's mantle.

Think about how Hollywood would put this story together, because Hollywood mirrors the way we think about things. If it didn't, it wouldn't sell any tickets. We like to have the way we think about things confirmed on the big screen.

The king of Aram has won victories over the King of Israel, largely because of the super powers of Naaman, played by Russel Crowe, invested in him by none other than the God of Israel, Himself. We're not told why. In Naaman's household, though, is a mole – the Israelite girl who had been kidnapped, played by Penelope Cruz. She is feeding the King of Israel covert information from the very household of Naaman. One day, she sees that he has become infected with a skin disease,

and she sends a coded message to the King of Israel, “Naaman is a leper! Now is the time!”

When she gets her reply, she is to use her skills to convince Naaman that the terrible disease can be wiped away if he will but petition the King of Israel for healing. She succeeds in convincing him, and he convinces the King of Aram to send him, with rich gifts.

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.”

In Samaria, capital of Israel, the letter and the rich gifts ignite panic, despite the coded message from the spy.

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.”

Well, of course it threw him into panic. His enemy, who prevails against him because of his great general, is now sending him gifts AND the general with instructions to cure him of an incurable disease. Failure to do so, or harming the general, would be grounds for all-out war instead of border raids.

I can't imagine where Hollywood would take it from there, but I am convinced it would involve a lot of explosions and pretty girls in unlikely costumes. When we read this story, though, we don't get any of that. The slave girl addresses Naaman's wife compassionately, almost tenderly.

“If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.”

Does our understanding of justice in the 21st Century allow any room for compassion such as this from the victim of a kidnapping toward her kidnapper? My expe-

rience teaches me that, in the main, the answer is “No”. Our 21st Century understanding of justice is punitive, not restorative. To us, justice means getting even with the bad guy. My experience teaches me that our understanding of justice begins by demonizing those that oppose us or frighten us. We live in a time of demons of our own creation and we, too often, believe that our calling is to cast out these demons. It isn’t. Casting out demons is God’s business. Our business is to deal even with our enemies with compassion.

The thing that got me thinking about this while I was preparing this sermon was the “Letter to my Old Master” reprinted on the Internet this week. The letter, dated 1865, is from Jourdon, a former slave to his former master, Colonel P. H. Anderson, of Big Spring, Tennessee in reply to an offer from the master to return to work in Tennessee. I put the entire letter in the bulletin,

but let's just look at the first paragraph

Sir: I got your letter, and was glad to find that you had not forgotten Jourdon, and that you wanted me to come back and live with you again, promising to do better for me than anybody else can. I have often felt uneasy about you. I thought the Yankees would have hung you long before this, for harboring Rebs they found at your house. I suppose they never heard about your going to Colonel Martin's to kill the Union soldier that was left by his company in their stable. Although you shot at me twice before I left you, I did not want to hear of your being hurt, and am glad you are still living. It would do me good to go back to the dear old home again, and see Miss Mary and Miss Martha and Allen, Esther, Green, and Lee. Give my love to them all, and tell them I hope we will meet in the better world, if not in this. I would have gone back to see you all when I was working in the Nashville Hospital, but one of the neighbors told me that Henry intended to shoot me if he ever got a chance.

For all the art within me, I could not better that para-

graph. The master is a demon if I ever heard of one. In another part of the letter, Jourdon writes:

In answering this letter, please state if there would be any safety for my Milly and Jane, who are now grown up, and both good-looking girls. You know how it was with poor Matilda and Catherine. I would rather stay here and starve—and die, if it come to that—than have my girls brought to shame by the violence and wickedness of their young masters.

The Colonel seems to have murdered a wounded Yankee. The slave, Jourdon, along with his whole family, has been held in shameful captivity, his daughters raped, the whole family forced to work for the wealth of another without compensation. He has been shot at by his master not once, but twice, and yet, the tone of the letter is unquestionably tender. In this time of polarized politics, when we ascribe demons to the other side, when we refuse to admit any virtue to the people in the

other corner, could we address this letter to one who oppressed us?

The slave girl who spoke to Naaman's wife could write such a letter. She saw, in place of her oppressor, the agony he felt from being stricken by "leprosy". She did not see the inequity of her situation at Naaman's hands, she viewed his need with compassion, and with compassion offered a solution.

In our time, we don't demonize people with skin diseases. We demonize people who have different ideas than we have. Just as in the time of Jesus, those demonized were cast out of society. For fear of contagion, people would not touch a leper.

Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.

Jesus touched him! Fearless of the possibility of

spreading contagion, Jesus touched him, and by doing so, He did more than cure the man. He invited the man back into the community from which he had been excluded.

Do you think we could return to a time when we could reach out and touch someone with different ideas? Or do we think of those on the opposite side of the aisle as unclean, untouchable? Why do we live in a time when one politician can revile another by hurling the word “moderate” at him? Have we so thoroughly swallowed Adam’s apple that we now believe that we hold within us the power to define good and evil?

I suppose Jesus could have used this cleansing for his own purposes, building the case that he was someone who should be listened to, but in Mark’s telling of the Gospel, Jesus insists on “the Messianic secret”. In Mark’s telling, Jesus refuses permission to spread the

power of His name because He knows that He can only be understood through the lens of the cross, and that lies still in the future. Instead, he commands the leper

After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.”

Again, Jesus underlines that the man has been re-integrated into the community. A leper could not enter the Temple. The compassion that Jesus has shown has operated to re-include the man into the life of the community. That is the way compassion functions. Compassion first sees that our differences, so huge in our minds, are tiny when compared to our reality as children of the one God. To connect with that idea – that we are all, at base, children of the one God – is to find the foundation from which we can do as Jesus did, and extend the hand of

compassion even to those who have been cast out of our community.

As applied to the current political debate, I could put it no better than did Anthony de Mello:

“What do you think of modern civilization?” he was once asked by a reporter. “I think that would be a very good idea,” he said.

AMEN

DAYTON, OHIO, August 7, 1865.

To my old Master, COLONEL P. H. ANDERSON, Big Spring, Tennessee.

Sir: I got your letter, and was glad to find that you had not forgotten Jourdon, and that you wanted me to come back and live with you again, promising to do better for me than anybody else can. I have often felt uneasy about you. I thought the Yankees would have hung you long before this, for harboring Rebs they found at your house. I suppose they never heard about your going to Colonel Martin's to kill the Union soldier that was left by his company in their stable. Although you shot at me twice before I left you, I did not want to hear of your being hurt, and am glad you are still living. It would do me good to go back to the dear old home again, and see Miss Mary and Miss Martha and Allen, Esther, Green, and Lee. Give my love to them all, and tell them I hope we will meet in the better world, if not in this. I would have gone back to see you all when I was working in the Nashville Hospital, but one of the neighbors told me that Henry intended to shoot me if he ever got a chance.

I want to know particularly what the good chance is you propose to give me. I am doing tolerably well here.

I get twenty-five dollars a month, with victuals and clothing; have a comfortable home for Mandy,—the folks call her Mrs. Anderson,—and the children—Milly, Jane, and Grundy—go to school and are learning well. The teacher says Grundy has a head for a preacher. They go to Sunday school, and Mandy and me attend church regularly. We are kindly treated. Sometimes we overhear others saying, "Them colored people were slaves" down in Tennessee. The children feel hurt when they hear such remarks; but I tell them it was no disgrace in Tennessee to belong to Colonel Anderson. Many darkeys would have been proud, as I used to be, to call you master. Now if you will write and say what wages you will give me, I will be better able to decide whether it would be to my advantage to move back again.

As to my freedom, which you say I can have, there is nothing to be gained on that score, as I got my free papers in 1864 from the Provost-Marshal-General of the Department of Nashville. Mandy says she would be afraid to go back without some proof that you were disposed to treat us justly and kindly; and we have concluded to test your sincerity by asking you to send us our wages for the time we served you. This will make us

forget and forgive old scores, and rely on your justice and friendship in the future. I served you faithfully for thirty-two years, and Mandy twenty years. At twenty-five dollars a month for me, and two dollars a week for Mandy, our earnings would amount to eleven thousand six hundred and eighty dollars. Add to this the interest for the time our wages have been kept back, and deduct what you paid for our clothing, and three doctor's visits to me, and pulling a tooth for Mandy, and the balance will show what we are in justice entitled to. Please send the money by Adams's Express, in care of V. Winters, Esq., Dayton, Ohio. If you fail to pay us for faithful labors in the past, we can have little faith in your promises in the future. We trust the good Maker has opened your eyes to the wrongs which you and your fathers have done to me and my fathers, in making us toil for you for generations without recompense. Here I draw my wages every Saturday night; but in Tennessee there was never any pay-day for the negroes any more than for the horses and cows. Surely there will be a day of reckoning for those who defraud the laborer of his hire.

In answering this letter, please state if there would be any safety for my Milly and Jane, who are now grown up, and both good-looking girls. You know how it was

with poor Matilda and Catherine. I would rather stay here and starve—and die, if it come to that—than have my girls brought to shame by the violence and wickedness of their young masters. You will also please state if there has been any schools opened for the colored children in your neighborhood. The great desire of my life now is to give my children an education, and have them form virtuous habits.

Say howdy to George Carter, and thank him for taking the pistol from you when you were shooting at me.

From your old servant,

JOURDON ANDERSON.