

Pastor T.C. Arnold
3rd Sunday after the Epiphany
2 Kings 5:1-15a
January 26th, 2020

The Gospel text for today from Matthew chapter 8 and the Old Testament text from 2 Kings chapter 5 compare and contrast in quite an interesting fashion. For example, both texts have a man of valor – Naaman and this centurion. Both texts have a person with leprosy – the unnamed man in the Gospel and the leper in the Old Testament reading is Naaman himself. And in both the Gospel text and in the Old Testament text, the two men of valor must rely completely on the power of God to give them what they need – healing, cleansing.

However, there is also a major contrast. The man of valor in the Gospel reading says to the Lord, “I am unworthy for you to come under my roof and heal my servant for whom I ask for today.” And, Naaman, when he is told by the prophet Elisha to go wash himself in the Jordan seven times, seven... that Godly and complete number... the complete number of times to wash clean all the disease in his body... he reacts quite negatively.

So, rather than receiving the news about washing in the Jordan with great joy, he rather resents the message – the message that wasn’t even given by Elisha but rather by his servant. “Aren’t the waters that are closer to where I live just as good? Why did I come all the way out here? I thought the prophet was going to come out and talk to me personally. I’m a commander in the Syrian army, no less. I thought he would wave his hand over my leprosy and call on the name of the Lord. There must be more to it than this. And more to the point, I’m worthy of more.”

Naaman’s reaction, his thoughts and words, remind us of some pretty famous words found in Proverbs 16:18: “*Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.*” Or, as it is often shortened, “pride goes before the fall.”

What is pride? Simply put it is this: The elevation of self above God – the breaking of the first commandment which is, “*have no other Gods beside me.*” We might say that pride is at the heart and soul of all sin. We might say that pride is the sin that all of us suffer with most. You ever want something for yourself that doesn’t belong to you? Pride is at the heart of that desire. You ever want to satisfy your selfish inhibitions even though it goes against God’s will? That’s pride again. You ever get jealous when someone gets recognition and you don’t? You ever want to take something from your neighbor because you believe you deserve it more? You ever covet, ever steal, ever bear false witness about your neighbor? You ever thought you deserve more when God has given you enough... and even more... than you deserve already? Pride!

Pride is such a major culprit in our sins against God and others. We are so full of ourselves – always thinking about ourselves first. We forget that God says that we are to love God first and our neighbor as ourselves. But instead, number one remains these three most important people – me, myself and I. So God gives us this warning to heed: “*Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for, ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’*” Want to know what to be? Be humble. Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Our Lord sets the ultimate example. Let’s look into the text and see what that looks like. For Naaman, God did not send a king. In fact, when Naaman went to the king he was upset that Naaman came to him. No, God sends a regular man – a prophet – and not even the prophet. God sends the servant of a prophet so that Naaman would know there is no power in the prophet because that man is a great man. No, the power is in God’s Word that He uses through simple washing. Naaman’s pride got in the way of understanding this.

In the Gospel text, two men, a leper and a centurion, have the very Word made flesh standing before them. The leper knew that all Jesus had to do was to say the word... and he would be clean. Amazing, the “Word” made flesh speaks a “word” and that does it. It makes him clean. Again, it happens with the centurion. The Word speaks a word and the centurion’s servant is healed from that moment on. It’s amazing! There is no special formula. All that needed to exist for the healing to happen was faith! The leper believed. The centurion believed.

Be believing people, beloved in the Lord. That is what we are indeed. And the power for us is in the Word. We are “made” to have clean hearts through the power of the Gospel. This comes through His appointed Word and Sacraments. This is such a blessed thing for Christians who revel in pride... who think they must be “self-made” people... who must scratch and claw to get to the top... who rage in jealousy because others have what we want for ourselves. Pride wells up and the self is put on a pedestal.

But we are first and foremost made to be God’s very own children through simple means that come from outside of us. God speaks it and it happens. He cleanses us from all unrighteousness. What a blessing.

Many of you know that my mother passed away back in September of last year. Since then, my siblings and I have been scurrying through boxes of material – photos, papers, old memories and books. It’s quite an emotional process. I decided to take for myself my mother’s hymnal that she used when she was in the nursing home – where she lived for 8 years. And since I have a number of hymnals already, I just put it on my shelf without really looking at it.

The other day I decided to open the hymnal to have a look inside. Most likely the reason I did this is because I misplaced the hymnal I normally use (this is not uncommon, by the way). Inside I found an obituary dated 2013 that she was using as a bookmark. It was the obit for her cousin Janet. That was not the interesting part, however. The obituary was placed at hymn 594, “*God’s Own Child I’ll Gladly Say It*,” the first hymn we had the pleasure of singing this morning. This was more than likely the last hymn that my mother sang in her private devotions. Now, my sisters and I sang many hymns to her... on her last day on this side of eternity, but I can’t help but imagining my mother singing in her room by herself the words that we were so blessed to sing this morning:

“God’s own child I’ll gladly say it. I am baptized into Christ. He because I could not pay it, gave my full redemption price.”

Cousin Janet for whom that obit was written... God’s own child... Christ gave the full redemption price. For my mother... God’s own Child... Christ gave the full redemption price. With a Word God speaks... with a water combined with that Word... for Naaman, for the leper, for the centurion’s servant, God cleanses from all unrighteousness. For beloved children today who are identified as such through our baptism... For you and for me who sing, “*God’s own child, I’ll gladly say it...*” (people who slip into the sin of pride) who are made that way because of Jesus... we find power in God’s Word. Power that forgives sins which cleanses sinners of all unrighteousness. His gift of righteousness that makes us who we are... God’s very own. This is good news.

How do we compare to Jesus? Or do we contrast with Him. Interestingly, we do both. In our sins, we are far from Him. But through His grace, the heavenly Father has made us sons and daughters. That comparison is gold for us. It means life. Oh how our Lord loves us so much that we are deemed worthy to receive eternal life by grace through faith in Jesus.

Amen

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.