

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
2/12/2012, Epiphany 6B
2 Kings 5:1-14
Seeing the Good, Having Strength for It, and Doing It

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As I mention in the Pastor's Notes in this morning's worship folder, I am much drawn to this morning's Prayer of the Day. These appointed prayers, some of which are quite ancient, are all meditations on Sacred Scripture. It is as if the Church pondered the Bible and then burst forth in prayer.

Today's Prayer speaks of a multiplication of graces. We need more than one grace in order to be faithful people in this world. Grace to discern the good is, of course, important, but it needs to be matched by graces of strength and concrete performance of the good deed. So, listen to our prayer again. I mean to illustrate it by way of today's stories about Naaman and Jesus. The Prayer goes thus:

Lord God, mercifully receive the prayers of your people. Help us *to see* and understand the things we ought to do, and give us grace and power *to do* them; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

SYRIA AND THAT MILITARY MAN, NAAMAN

Let's begin by speaking of that military man, Naaman. The story starts in Syria, which nowadays has gained the wrath of the world for the brutal suppression of dissent by the Syrian government. But Syria is an ancient land, and it happens to be a land of some romance for me. Long ago, back in the days of the early Church, Syria was the home of St. John Chrysostom. He was born and raised in Antioch, Syria, and served there as Bishop before becoming the Archbishop of Constantinople. As a young man, Chrysostom had devoted himself to the study of scripture, up in the mountains surrounding Antioch. He neglected food, he neglected rest, he lived alone in a hut or a cave. They say that he hardly even sat down or slept at night, but spent two years memorizing the Bible and reflecting on it. Later he became Bishop of Antioch and is regarded as the greatest preacher the church has ever known.

Centuries before Chrysostom, his town, Antioch, was renowned as one of the centers of early Christianity. Indeed, it was at Antioch that the early followers of Jesus were first called "Christians":

²⁶And when he [Barnabas] had found him [Paul], he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch. (Acts 11:26, KJV)

St. Paul was converted from a persecutor of the church to a preacher of Christ in Syria, on the road to Damascus in that land.

And then, long before Chrysostom and St. Paul, there was this military man in Syria, Naaman. He was a general so accomplished in his work that he was known not only by the King of *Syria*, but also by the God of *Israel*. Strange thing! Our text says that the God of Israel not only noted Naaman, but was with him in his victories, and these victories include battles against Israel!

¹Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master and in high favor, because by him *the LORD* [the God of Israel] had given victory to Syria. (2 Kings 5:1, RSV)

Naaman was a mighty man of valor, in high favor with the King of Syria, but, alas, he was a leper. His might and his fame could not spare him from this affliction. There were plenty of poor farmers in the field with better skin than him. “All the king’s horses and all the king’s men” could not make Naaman whole again.

Naaman might have had grace of discernment when it came to military strategy and tactics, but he did not have discernment when it came to his own healing. Neither did his king. Both of them were accustomed to the ways of power and diplomacy, but they were not accustomed to the ways of faith. For that, we need to turn to the little ones in the story. I mean the maid and the servants. This is a fun part of this story, in my opinion. Naaman was a mighty man, yes, and in the end he was healed of his leprosy, but it took the contributions of the little ones to get the job done. The maid and the servants: they were the ones with the grace of discernment.

THE LITTLE ONES

The story begins with “a little maid from the land of Israel.” She had been carried off from Israel by the Syrians during one of their raids. In her new land, she waited on the wife of Naaman. Her heart seems not to have been spoiled or embittered by her captivity. She seems to be a kind-hearted young woman. She sees that her master suffers with leprosy and so she urges a way forward. She tells her mistress that there is a prophet in Israel who can heal Naaman. She means the prophet Elisha.

Well, the news ascends all the way to the throne of Syria, where the ways of diplomacy begin grinding away. The little maid’s talk of the prophet Elisha is forgotten. Instead, there are royal letters sent king-to-king, there are magnificent gifts sent to the king of Israel, there are chariots and horses, and there is despair over what appears to be a looming war. Neither Naaman nor the kings of Syria and Israel discern what needs to be done. They don’t have a clue, really. It takes the

prophet Elisha to get things back on track. Glad to say, Naaman continues his path toward Elisha.

Then things threaten to break down again, because Naaman is offended by Elisha's instruction to wash in the Jordan River. Naaman would have gone home unhealed. He would have faded from the pages of Sacred Scripture except that, again, little ones come to the rescue. His servants talk sense to him, and thereby nudge the story along. Glad to say, once Naaman sees what he should do, he goes ahead and does it. He washes in the Jordan seven times and is healed.

And so it is that the little ones -- the maid and the servants -- are the heroes of this story. Indeed, the little ones are also the heroes of heaven, and in our heart-of-hearts we sometimes know that to be so. We can sense the truth of the saying of our Lord concerning a great reversal of things and stand amazed by it:

³⁰But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.
(Matthew 19:30, KJV)

Then, all the rest of us will be glad to say that we knew the little ones back when we were in our earthly lives. Heaven measures things differently, according to the line of love. The divine yardstick does not measure wealth or power, but love.

How many times over the years, for example, have I heard Parish Secretary Karen Rombey on the phone, checking in on someone who has been sick or in the hospital. "Can I run any errands for you? Can I do some grocery shopping for you?" Karen shows this kindness to others, and hardly even notices that she is doing in, but heaven takes note, and I will be very proud to say that I know Karen Rombey when, by God's mercy, I get to heaven.

The eyes of God are on the little ones. He sees the mighty general Naaman, and he sees the King of Syria and the King of Israel, but he also sees the little maid who serves Naaman's wife and he sees the servants who give good advice to the Naaman.

Such humble deeds of goodness go on continually, and they are the true glories of our land. I have a colleague, for example, who is ministering to two elderly ladies, both frail, both with no money, but with lifetimes of love behind them. They met when they were children at an orphanage. One woman is deaf and mute and can hardly read. All of their lives, they have taken care of each other. The one who can hear and speak has served as the spokesperson for the one who cannot do such things. The one knows the other so well, that she can speak truly on behalf of her friend. Now, both ladies are about played out. But their pastor and others who minister to them recognize that they are giants on earth. At first glance they seem old and frail and disabled. But the truth is far more glorious. The Lord regards the lowly and appreciates their lives of love and will establish them with true glory in the eternal kingdom.

So, that is one of the components of holiness on earth: the ability "to see and understand the things we ought to do" is very important, and it is a grace that the little ones of earth can exercise as well as the mighty can.

STRENGTH TO DO THE GOOD

Next, let us acknowledge that *seeing* what we ought to do is good, but sometimes we lack the *strength* to do it. Samson, for example, could pull down the pillars of the Philistine temple¹, thereby advancing the cause of Israel, because, well, he was Samson. The little maid in today's story could not have done that. Even if she could see that it would be good to do, she lacked the strength to do so.

Likewise, Pilate could order the release of Barabbas, because he was Pilate.² He was the one with the power and authority to do it. He had strength to match his sense of what he ought to do.

Often we lack such strength. So Mary and Martha stand at the tomb of their brother, Lazareth, and weep. What else can they do? They would raise him back to life if they could, but they lack the power to do it. So they stand at the grave and weep, representing the world, standing there for a humanity that all too often knows what would be good, but lacks the strength to do it.

THE PUZZLE OF OUR HUMAN RACE

But the puzzle of our human race is that sometimes we possess both knowledge of the good and strength to do, but we do not do it. Our discernment and our strength fall short of the actual doing. Our grace of knowing the good remains without the fruit of actually doing it.

Peter, for example knows that he should not deny his Master. He has sworn that he will never deny Jesus. Yet he wilts before the questions of a maid. What needs to be done lies within his power. He needs simply open his mouth and speak the words of truth: "Yes, I know Jesus, and I am proud to call him my Master and my Friend." But his knowledge and ability fall short of actually doing the good deed.

Likewise Pilate knows that he should release Jesus. He is the duly appointed governor. Authority has been entrusted to him to release the innocent. He judges that Jesus is innocent, yet condemns him to be crucified anyway. He washes his hands of the matter, but eternity stretches before him, and the harm he has done his soul will not wash off as easily as the dust on his hands.

It is because of this reality that it is good for us to pray as today's Prayer teaches us: that not only will we see and understand what we ought to do, but also that we will actually *do* it.

WE ARE AT OUR BEST

And going the other way around, our human race is at its best when we not only see what ought to be done, but go ahead and get the job done.

¹ Judges 16:23-30

² Matthew 27:15-26

Naaman is shepherded along by the little ones in his story -- his servants and his wife's maid. But, to his credit, once they help him to see what needs to be done, he goes ahead and does it, to his salvation.

Likewise, when Jesus sees the plight of the leper in today's Gospel story³, he heals the man. This is one of the few Biblical texts that speaks of the emotions of Jesus as he does a miracle. Often Jesus simply heals those in need, without the Bible telling us what Jesus felt about the situation. But in this text, we learn that Jesus has compassion on the leper:

⁴¹Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I will; be clean." (Mark 1:41, RSV)

But the thing is, it is the way of this world that good motives and noble feelings sometimes fall short of actual performance. But not with Jesus. He feels pity for the man and straightway heals him.

Even more grandly, when the Second Person of the Holy Trinity sat safe and sound up in heaven, but regarded human misery here on earth, he plunged into the incarnation and submitted to the Cross, that he might save us. His insight to what needed to be done was matched by his actual doing of the deed.

With our Lord Jesus, there is no falling short of good intentions. Whatever the cost, he goes ahead and does what needs to be done. His grace of discernment is matched by his grace of doing.

Let it be so with us. There are plenty of good deeds waiting to be done, like that of the little maid in the story of Naaman, like the servants too of that mighty man, like the elderly women who have little money, but have loving care to share with one another, and chief of all, like our Lord Jesus, who went about not only seeing the good that needed to be done, but actually doing it, to the benefit of humanity back then, and now, and forevermore. Amen.

³ Mark 1:40-45