

“THE BOTTOM LINE”
2 Kings 5:1-14; Mark 1:40-45
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Years ago, I went to a college reunion, and one of the features of this particular gathering was a panel discussion by several former students who had gone on to have interesting, out of the mainstream careers. One of these was a pyrotechnical designer. He designed fireworks displays for large cities and casinos, for kings and princes, and movie stars. You never know where a chemistry degree might take you! One woman was a gymnast who went on to have a career as an acrobat in Cirque de Soleil. And a third was a magician. As a history major, he had written his senior essay on the oral tradition of magic, how great magicians passed their best tricks from generation to generation, never writing anything down, only showing and telling the favored one or two protégés. This magician, an engaging man whose name I think was Brian, had found as he talked with magicians and got them to share some of their craft with him, that he had some natural ability. He started doing magic at children’s parties as a way of making money during graduate school. His skills got better and better as did his gigs, and finally he abandoned his Ph.D. for a life as a performer. Isn’t it interesting how people find careers!

Brian punctuated his talk with magic tricks, pulling coins out of the air, making them disappear and reappear in a variety of odd places. One of the great tools of magic, he told us, is misdirection. If you want to do something over here, you make sure that people are looking over here. You get them to focus in the wrong places.

Our story this morning from the Hebrew Bible is a story about misdirection. It’s about how if you’re looking in the wrong place, you’ll miss the most important thing going on, and the story is so beautifully constructed that this misdirection functions on several levels at once. Let me take you through it layer by layer.

When you read the story through, the first thing that strikes you is the comedic elements of the tale. Namaan, a gentile, commander of the army of the King of Aram, is afflicted with leprosy. One of his household slaves, a young Israelite girl who served Namaan’s wife, told the wife that there was a prophet in Samaria, in Israel, who could cure Namaan’s illness. Namaan went and told the King of Aram, who sent Namaan, along with a letter, directly to the King of Israel. Enter comedic element one: the king of Israel received this letter and tore his clothes believing that the King of Aram was picking a fight with him. Now, this is a pretty good joke in biblical terms: we get to laugh first because the King of Aram was so blinded by his sense of consequence that he assumed that anyone with the power to do so great a thing as cure leprosy would be in the household of the king. He literally misdirected Namaan to the wrong place. And we get another chuckle when the King of Israel misinterprets what’s going on and thinks the King of Aram is out to get him. Clearly, in biblical times just like today, the foibles and mistakes of the rich and powerful made for good public entertainment.

Next comes the comedic high point of the story. Namaan goes to the prophet Elisha’s house; Elisha sends a messenger out to tell Namaan to go wash in the Jordan; and Namaan has what is really best described as a tantrum. The prophet has offended his sense of consequence. He’s furious because the prophet himself did not come out to meet him and perform some elaborate ritual over him in order to effect the cure. And wash in the Jordan! Didn’t this two-bit Israelite prophet know that the rivers of Aram were bigger and better than anything Israel had to offer? Namaan stalks off in a rage, and almost misses entirely his chance to be healed because of his arrogance, because of his desire to have this cure be as big, as dramatic as Namaan’s sense of his illness.

So, now it's time for a moment of honesty. How many of you, when you heard this story read, stopped there in your interpretation of what this story is about. That it's about Namaan and his prejudices as a rich and powerful person getting in the way of his being healed, and isn't that funny. Isn't that an interesting cautionary tale? How many of you ended there in thinking about this story? I want to see hands here. Because if you ended there, you, like the King of Aram and the King of Israel and like Namaan, you were looking in the wrong places, misdirected by your preconceptions.

Let me take you through the story again. Namaan, this rich and powerful man, had leprosy. And when his wife came to him and told him that a slave girl had told her that there was a prophet in Israel who could cure him, he listened to her. Think about that for a moment. What this means is that, first of all, Namaan was a man who treated his servants well. His slave wanted what was best for him; she cared about him. That speaks well for who Namaan was. And he listened not only to his wife, but to a recommendation from a slave. This gets more and more interesting in telling us who Namaan was as a person. And then after the fiasco at Elisha's house, when Namaan was fully enraged, his other servants were willing to confront him with his mistake. They called him "father," a familial term of respect, not Lord, the formal address between master and slave. "Father," they said, "if this prophet had asked you to do something hard, would you not have done it? Why will you not at least try this easy thing?" Do you realize what a chance they were taking? And Namaan, even as upset as he was, pulled himself together and paid attention to their words. Think about that. Self-control. A willingness to have his mind changed even by those whom others would deem as of no account. And then Namaan did as the servants suggested, and he was healed that day.

The bottom line in this story is not that Namaan is a fool, but that Namaan is a very good man. He is highly thought of, respected by his lord the King, and by his wife, and by his servants. He is willing to listen to those who are "beneath" him; he is willing to change his mind when someone speaks truth to him. The bottom line in this story for Namaan is not that he almost didn't get cured because of who he was but that he did get cured precisely because of who he was. And the bottom line for us is that if we let ourselves be misdirected into focusing our attention on Namaan's weaknesses, we will miss the fullness of his stature as a man. And if we miss who Namaan really was, then what else are we missing?

One of the reasons I respect, especially, the stories of the Hebrew Bible is that the Bible is not shy about painting human beings real. Abraham, the great patriarch, was a man of extraordinary faith, except when he got scared and tried to pass his wife off as his sister, and except for when it came to managing his family and he stood back passively too often. David was a great king and he had an adulterous affair with Bathsheba. Namaan, commander of the armies of Aram, though a gentile and a military man, was a righteous man even though he could be a pompous jerk at times.

We who are human, there is always both good and not-so-good mixed in us. We know that intellectually. We know that to be human is to be complex, multi-faceted, and well, in the language of the church, sinful. And yet something within us balks at that knowledge. We want our good and evil served up in absolutes, and that does not serve us well when dealing with other people or when thinking about ourselves.

What do we learn from the story of Namaan? This is a gentle story and a humorous one, but it should remind us not to rush to judgment about others or ourselves. It should challenge us to try to see other people whole, as potentially worthy of respect and admiration even though they are flawed, even if those flaws irritate us, even if we have to look closer to find their best qualities. Too often we judge quickly, superficially, and absolutely. We need to be both more discerning and more accepting of the mixedness of our human nature, kinder to both others and ourselves.

God made us human. That's the good news of this story. God made us human and even though we are less

than perfect, even though we too often misperceive, even though our faults cause us to get in our own way, still we are capable of good; still we can be worthy of admiration; still we can participate in our own healing and the healing of others. That's the bottom line. Thanks be to God. Amen.