
Dip Into Faith
2 Kings 5: 1-19
A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 7, 2013 by Christy Lohr Sapp

One of my colleagues spent enough time living in the mid-west that she picked up some Minnesotan affectations. Among the perkier of these traits is her proclivity for rhyming phrases. She'll often end a conversation about a job yet to be done with "Easy peasy lemon squeezy!"

"Easy peasy lemon squeezy." We like things to be easy, don't we? As a matter of fact, our society is driven by ease and convenience. Staples has made "Easy" its tag line. It has a series of ads in which mountains of organizational office tasks are decimated by a smart, efficient business manager who uses the red "Easy" button and says, "That was easy." From fast food, to on-line banking and speed dating, we want things to be quick and easy. If a task is too cumbersome or time-consuming, we shy away from it and look for alternatives. Hand-written notes have given way to quick emails. Leisurely phone conversations have been overtaken by instant messages or short texts.

At the same time, however, if something seems to be *too* easy, we don't trust it. It's a mixed message, isn't it? We want an easy, uncomplicated life, but life ain't easy. Worthwhile victories are hard-won. When important things materialize too quickly, we are suspicious – waiting for the next shoe to drop. After all, isn't the good stuff in life better if it's slow, made from scratch and not rushed? Easy sometimes implies cheap, flimsy or half-hearted. The easy answer is rarely the one that the professor wants. The easy fix is not what quality plumbers or contractors advise. The easy cure is elusive for doctors and patients. The truly good thing is worth the wait and the extra effort.

This is the sort of paradox that we find in today's reading from 2 Kings. Naaman is offered an easy solution to his problem, but the larger implications mean a life of faith that is not as easy as it seems.

Naaman is introduced as a "great man" who has power and authority. He is successful, respected, victorious in battle, and he enjoys a personal relationship with his king. Yet, this mighty warrior suffers from leprosy – a disease that causes pain, derision and social stigma. In the time, leprosy was believed to be a

physical manifestation of spiritual or moral transgression. It was a curse from God marking someone as sinful. It suggested that one was unclean and unworthy of residing in 'polite' society. Given the stigma of the disease, we have to assume that this is wildly embarrassing for Naaman, his family and his king. After all, how is it possible that someone with prominence and stature, someone with authority and rank, could suffer from leprosy? It seems like an anomaly that a person so great would be brought so low in this way.

We are not told what Naaman has tried to cure his disease prior to this episode. I wonder if he went through the stages of grief that are typical when one receives life-altering news. Perhaps he was in denial when the first blemish appeared on his skin. Or, perhaps he was angry that something like this would happen to a man like him. Perhaps he immediately started an aggressive treatment plan using the newest medical technologies. We don't know what led him to the point of taking the advice of his wife's serving girl. The power dynamic is noteworthy, though, and suggests that he was at the end of his rope. Here we have a mighty warrior and high-ranking military leader taking medical advice from an unnamed slave girl. Based on her recommendation and with the full support of his king, Naaman seeks out the help of the prophet in Israel across the Jordan.

He travels a great distance and offers a handsome price for a remedy. Maybe you can understand Naaman's surprise, then, when he's told simply, "Wash and be clean." It is offensive. He has already tried everything – all of the latest miracle cures – and this guy Elisha – the prophet of a defeated country – just tells him (through a messenger – not even face-to-face) to bathe in the muddy Jordan. Really?! The Jordan is the boundary between Naaman's country and Israel – between the victors and the defeated. To Naaman the Jordan represents the tracks on which Elisha and his people occupy the wrong side. Elisha can't be serious. But he is. This is no expensive miracle cure. This is no grueling regiment. This is no flashy treatment. It is merely, "Wash and be clean." This is the simplicity of faith.

Naaman's cure is "easy peasy, lemon squeezy." Much like the story of faith for many of us, the difficult part for Naaman comes in humbling himself to submit to this cure and in allowing himself to be changed by it. Once he dips into the faith that is available to him, Naaman emerges as a believer. In crossing this physical,

spiritual and emotional boundary - the physical boundary of warring countries and the emotional boundary of pride - he crosses over from unbelief to belief, from hubris to humility, and from hopelessness to faith. He emerges a new man: reborn and renewed.

The miraculous transformation causes him to proclaim that the God of Israel is supreme. “In his healing, Naaman has been met and healed by the Lord in a way that leads to knowing.”¹ And, this knowing is the kind that comes easily – with certainty and conviction, with joy and jubilation. It is the kind of knowing that is born of faith and an encounter with the God of love.

Pope Francis issued his first papal encyclical last week, and this letter titled “Light of Faith” focuses on the role of faith in the Christian’s life. He writes, “Faith is born of an encounter with the living God who calls us and reveals his love, a love which precedes us and upon which we can lean for security and for building our lives. Transformed by this love, we gain fresh vision, new eyes to see.”² This is the faith that Naaman encounters in Israel in the muddy waters of the Jordan. He emerges not only with clean skin, but also with clear eyes and a full heart.

At the same time, however, this new knowledge is not without its difficulties for Naaman. This newly envisioned faith could set him up for a challenging new reality. Remember that Naaman comes from the kingdom on the **other** side of the Jordan, the kingdom that defeated Israel, and this kingdom worships different gods. Yet, the God of Israel demands belief in him alone. Naaman knows that he runs the risk of breaking the first two commandments when he goes back to his country and resumes his place at the king’s side. He worries about this, but again Elisha replies with an easy answer, “Go in peace.”

In Luke’s gospel, just a chapter or so before our reading today, Jesus says the same thing to the woman with the hemorrhage. You may recall the story: The woman sneaks up to Jesus in the crowd, touches the hem of his garment, and is cured. Like Naaman, she finds an easy answer to her problem. When Jesus confronts her, he says, “Your faith has made you well, go in peace.” I wonder if you, like me, cannot help but impose Jesus’ words onto the Naaman story, as well. I hear Elisha saying in response to Naaman’s lingering

¹ Samuel Giere, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=627

² http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei_en.pdf

concerns, “Your *faith* has made you well now and forever more. Go in peace.” Perhaps Naaman would have said that it was hope or desperation that initially sent him to Elisha, but in truth, it was faith – even if a quiet, unsure and tentative one. It was the faith that was written on his heart that led him to Elisha. It was the faith that is a gift from God – given freely and open to all - that led him to wholeness. It is not the miraculous curative properties of the Jordan but Naaman’s faith in and submission to the God of Israel that heals. The servants in the story understand this, but it takes a dip into that faith for Naaman to get it. This faith, even though it is given by God freely and easily, comes with a cost, however, because while it is easy to have faith, it is difficult to live faithfully.

The story of Naaman’s healing is the story of a faith that is easy to have because it is freely given but is difficult to live because it requires giving of oneself. It is an exercise in evangelism and border crossing. The gospel readings from Luke last week and today remind us that there are times when proclamation of the God of Israel can result in rejection. Evangelism is easy when we are filled with joy and gratitude for the works of grace that God has performed in our lives. But evangelism is difficult when we risk persecution or alienation. It is easy because the good news of God’s grace is a story we love to tell, but difficult because this story tells of shifts in power dynamics and allegiances. Easy because there are great promises in store for God’s people, but difficult because the priorities of this world are dismissed for the promises of the next. And this, my friends, is the story of our faith. It is a paradox of power and a tension between what is easy and what is difficult.

Naaman’s dip into faith is easy, but emerging fully into a new life and all that comes with it is difficult. The post-leprosy life for Naaman is going to be a challenge – it will mean navigating relationships differently, it will mean siding with the God of the ‘defeated’.

We live the same story through our baptisms. In baptism God liberates us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Through the waters of baptism, we are reborn children of God and inheritors of eternal life. By water and the Holy Spirit we are made members of the Church which is the body of Christ, and as we live with Christ and his people, we grow in faith, love and obedience to God’s

will. But, this can be oh-so difficult. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Galatians³ that this task of living with God's people means dealing with each other in a spirit of gentleness, bearing one another's burdens in love, working for the good of all, and doing what is right. And while that all sounds easy enough, man is it difficult! We open ourselves up for hurt and rejection and derision when we follow the rule of love. We are called to shift our priorities. Sure, it is easy to care but putting flesh on that care is hard – especially when that caring involves associating with those who are deemed 'inferior' – those who are defeated, devalued and dejected. Visiting the sick is hard – especially if it means taking time out of an already busy week. Giving our money to the poor is hard – especially if it means having less for ourselves. Praying with and for one another is hard – especially if it means acknowledging our own shortcomings and failures. Risking ourselves in the service of God is hard – especially if it means losing our families or our lives. In our baptisms we, like Naaman, emerge from the waters restored and cleaned. That part is easy. But, like Naaman, we are then compelled to live into those baptismal promises, and that part is hard – especially when the world constantly calls us to bow down before other gods.

It is easy enough to dip into faith, but we soon find ourselves in over our heads. We either become like the king of Israel in the Naaman story who rends his clothes and wails in the face of great need. After all, who are we to cure the sick? Who are we to bring about peace? Who are we to fight for justice? Or, like the seventy whom Jesus sends out, we become boastful about our accomplishments. Either is a difficult trap to avoid. Our faith should move us to work for the good of all, but how do we do so without becoming overwhelmed by the demands around us or bloated by our own sense of self worth?

The good news we hear today is that we have an 'easy button'. We do not do this stuff of faith alone. Pope Francis reminds us that "It is impossible to believe on our own. Faith is not simply an individual decision which takes place in the depths of (our hearts), nor a completely private relationship between the ... believer and the divine ... By its very nature, faith is open to the "We" of the Church; it always takes place

³ Galatians 6: 1-10

within her communion.”⁴ Our faith is given to us freely by God, and it is nurtured in the communities we inhabit. As we grow in faith, we grow in love toward one another until we find that there is a new creation in which we are all restored to the fullness of life. Paul reminds us to bear one another’s burdens. In this way we will fulfill the law of Christ.⁵ Christ’s law is love in the face of hatred. Christ’s law is belief in the face of doubt. Christ’s law is gratitude and humility and self-sacrifice. And for those who follow God’s rule - as simultaneously easy and difficult as doing so may seem – for those who dip into the faith, may you be restored like Naaman, and may peace and mercy be upon you.

Amen.

⁴ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei_en.pdf

⁵ Galatians 6: 15, 2