

Healing Of Naaman's Leprosy

A Sermon by the Rev. Eric H. Carswell

Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored to you, and you shall be clean. II Kings 5:10

The description of the healing of Naaman seems to have as its primary focus the value of overcoming destructive pride. Naaman is clearly not a bad person. He was a renowned commander of the powerful Syrian army. He is called "a mighty man of valor." It specifically states that by means of his ability the Lord had given victory to Syria. But his life was significantly crippled by leprosy. The term leprosy in the Old and New Testaments apparently was used to describe a wide variety of skin diseases, ranging from psoriasis to the horrifying disease we more commonly associate with the term. Naaman obviously was allowed to mingle freely with other people. People with the disease now called, "Hansen's Disease" were banished from human society. But whatever the disease was, it clearly was a cause of significant trouble and concern. Naaman's desire to be healed and the importance he placed on it is shown both by his willingness to travel a great distance and also by the rich gifts which he brought with him as a symbol of gratitude for that healing.

Naaman apparently had very clear expectations of being treated with great respect. He arrived at Elisha's front door riding his chariot, the luxury vehicle of ancient times. He was accompanied by a retinue of servants. The story specifically states that as he turned in anger from Elisha's messenger he thought to himself, "He will surely come out to me, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place, and heal the leprosy." Can you picture him stomping off muttering to himself about what a stupid thing it was to wash in the Jordan River and that if he had to wash in a river, he could think of much better ones in Syria than those that could be found in Israel.

Naaman fortunately had some wise, compassionate, and brave servants. They approached him, and said with great respect, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do something great, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he says to you, 'Wash, and be clean?'" Naaman was willing to hear their counsel and went and washed and his skin became renewed like that of a little child. He returned with

a deeply grateful heart and proclaimed, "Indeed, now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel." He asked for permission to take two mule load of earth from Israel home that he might properly be able worship the God of this land, and he begged forgiveness if he ever needed to accompany his master the king of Syria to bow down in the temple of another god.

The story ends with a healed and grateful Naaman returning home. If his anger and pride had gotten the better of him, then the miracle of healing would never have happened.

This story can also be seen as a parable with a deeper level of meaning. Naaman's leprosy represents a spiritual problem that we all fall prey to. It represents a person who is running his or her life based on seriously false beliefs and assumptions. The Writings of the New Church describe Naaman's leprosy as representing false assumptions and beliefs about what is true and about what is good. These aren't issues of fact such as whether the world is round or flat or matters of opinion such as whether Chicago is a better city to live in than Los Angeles. Naaman's leprosy represents potentially true ideas that the Lord would like us to know, but which have been twisted, over-stated, or misapplied. It is very important that we recognize that knowing the truth about some way of acting, some event, some person, or ourselves is not a simple matter. The Writings of the New Church refer to "the falsification of truth and good." An idea which in itself is true or some value or way of acting which in itself is good, are made false when their useful implications and it useful meaning are not recognized and instead they become twisted, over-stated, or misapplied in a person's life. We can believe that we have gained some truth or recognized some good from the Lord through His Word, but really what we have in our mind is "falsified truth and good." This falsified truth and good can cause many problems, some very subtle and others huge. The consequences of these problems hurts our lives, the lives of people around us, and the uses we seek to support.

Leprosy refers to a disease of the skin. When our skin is serving us well it is one of the key means of providing us with feedback about our environment. If a person cannot feel pain, heat, cold, rough, smooth or even just how much pressure he is using to accomplish something it is hard for him to take care of himself or respond as usefully to what is happening around him. The lack of sensitivity in his skin causes troubles of many kinds. Likewise, when a person has incorporated a twisted,

overstated, or misapplied truth and good into his approach to life it can lead him to be insensitive to important realities. He doesn't recognize his own motivations, thoughts and behavior very clearly. He misperceives others. He has a hard time seeing what the Lord would recognize as the greater uses to be served in any setting.

What are some examples of falsified truth and good? We know that it is important that we care about and try to provide that good things happen and that bad things are avoided. The Lord has told us that evil and false things are to be shunned or fled from. We would want to foster a commitment to shunning evils and false ideas in ourselves and in our children. But picture a kindergartner who finds it nearly impossible to accept anything less than perfection in his younger siblings. If the teams for a game at school seem unfair, he shuns the game, the teacher, the whole setting--that is he is so upset at the unfairness it is impossible for him to participate. He may argue with the teacher. He may have a temper tantrum. Part of the basis for these responses can be his belief that it is very important that the right thing be done at all times. While a teacher or parent might appreciate aspects of the little child's zeal for justice and fairness, it can often produce messy and destructive responses in the child's life. The person, young or old, who cannot tolerate it when what he or she perceives to be the right thing isn't being done will hurt himself, his relationships with people around him, and many of the uses he believes in. Sometimes this form of falsified truth and good takes the form of extreme perfectionism. Such a person's desire to have things exactly correct can run himself ragged, be demoralizing because he can never achieve it, and he can be a very difficult person to work with or even be around.

Another example of falsified truth and good includes a man who insists that everything be sensible and practical. In the New Testament story, when the woman anointed the Lord with an extremely expensive oil, some of the disciples thought it was a waste of resources that could have been better used to care for the poor. There is an element to many gifts of love that aren't sensible. It would be like a husband saying to his wife, "I would buy you flowers but they would just die within a few days and so it seems like a waste of money."

Another example of falsified truth is a woman who operates from a very external and short term definition of being nice. Her discipline of her children is almost exclusively gentle reminders and when these don't work, she gives in or allows the child what he wants. She seeks, at

almost cost, to avoid confrontations with her husband. She would rather listen to a telephone marketing person for five minutes in the middle of key supper preparations for her hungry children, than cut the person off with a firm, "No, thank you." and hanging up on them. Her desire to be nice isn't bad in itself and it can be very good, but it depends on what she is willing to sacrifice to get it. Jesus certainly didn't appear to be acting very nicely when he went into the temple in Jerusalem wrecked the stalls of immoral merchants, and drove them out with a whip.

One more example of falsified truth is the person who feels to strongly drawn to "fix" any sadness, discouragement, or other negative state in others as soon as possible. Such a person can unintentionally leave a widow who is grieving the absence of her husband the message, "You shouldn't be sad." Such a person can unintentionally force a resolution to a problem when the resolution may be pre-mature or even destructive.

We cannot possibly avoid misunderstanding what is really true and good as we walk our spiritual pathways toward heaven. The Writings of the New Church state that even in heaven angels still misunderstand what is really true and good. Swedenborg relates the following words of an angel:

In this world we are instructed and taught what is good and true, also what is just and right, the same as in the natural world. Moreover, we learn these things not directly from God but indirectly through others. Every angel, too, like every man, thinks truth and does good as though of himself, and this is not pure but mixed in character, depending on the angel's state. In addition, among angels also, some are simple and some wise, and the wise have to make judgments when the simple ones among them, owing to their simpleness or ignorance, are uncertain about what is just or deviate from it. (Conjugal Love 207:4)

We all have the problem of Naaman's leprosy. The means by which we can be healed of this is very simple, like washing in the Jordan River seven times. There are basic true ideas and good actions which the Lord would lead us to. These are taught over and over again in the Word. Some of these basic ideas are the powerful means that the Lord can use to lead us away from the falsified truth and good that crippling us. We have to be willing to admit that there are problems in the way we approach life at present and we have to be willing to follow the simple

call to wash ourselves not once, but seven times, which represents a continuing process--one that can continue to eternity.

Our part in the continuing process of spiritual washing isn't heroic. Imagine telling a friend, "I resisted the impulse to speak and act from a feeling of impatience three times yesterday." A good friend might smile and say, "Good for you" but he probably wouldn't be deeply awed by your accomplishment.

The Lord calls us to recognize that aspects of our lives could be better. We could better serve ourselves, those around us, and ultimately the Lord Himself if we can be cleansed of the twisted, over-stated, or misapplied concepts about what is true and good to which we are inclined. Spiritual leprosy is dangerous. To be healed the Lord calls us to a simple, daily task which is absolutely essential if we want to grow spiritually, if we want to serve others better, if we want to live our lives more wisely. May we pray that the miracle that occurred for Naaman also occur in many areas of our own lives. "So Naaman went down and dipped seven times in the Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean." (II Kings 5:14) AMEN.

*Lessons: II Kings 5:1-14, Matthew 6:38-48, Apocalypse Explained
475:17-18*