

Feb. 12, 2012

“Great vs. Small”

I Kings 5:1-14

The books of I and II Samuel and I and II Kings all used to be one big book of wonderful stories about people who thought they were great but God made them small...and people who thought they were small and God made them great. It's by the same folks who brought you David and Goliath. It's by the same folks who brought you Solomon, whose wives (it is said) included 700 princesses and 300 porcupines. And it is by the same folks who brought you Naaman the Syrian. Naaman was this great Syrian general, a war hero, a master planner of battles...who had this little problem. He had a skin disease. Leprosy, in those days, was serious enough to get you knocked off the invitation list to all the great parties. In fact, if you had a skin disease, you were weren't invited to anything. The great General Naaman, whose armies made enemies quake in their boots, was helpless before this skin disease.

Mrs. Naaman had this little Israelite slave girl who sighed one day as she was combing out her mistresses hair. “If only the general would seek out the great prophet of Israel. I bet he could find a cure for his leprosy.” Mrs. Naaman told her husband, who took the idea to the King of Aram. The king of Aram thought it was a great idea! He wrote a letter to his colleague, the king of Israel. Naaman packed his camels with buckets of money made his way down to Samaria. When the king of Israel read the letter from the king of Aram, suggesting *he* might cure his general, he just about had a heart attack! “Who am I, God? I can't cure this man! Is the King of Aram trying to pick a fight?”

The great prophet Elisha heard the king's plight and sent for Naaman. He would cure the general's leprosy...so that the world might know there is a prophet in Israel...and that our God is an awesome God.

Naaman brought his great train of servants and buckets of money down to Elisha's front door, expecting the great prophet to say a lot of impressive words, swoop and wave his hands over Naaman's skin and produce this dramatic powerful healing event. Imagine his surprise when Elisha simply sent his lackey out with instructions: “Go wash in the muddy little Jordan River seven times. You will be healed!”

Well...the great, important, war hero-master battle tactician-general was livid! Who did Elisha think he was, sending his lackey out to a person of his importance! Who did he think he was, sending him to this unimpressive little creek, when there were better, more majestic, more beautiful rivers in his home country? He turned in a fit of rage...sure that he had wasted his time.

Naaman's servants begged and pleaded with him to reconsider. After all, Elisha wasn't asking much...just go and dip in the stream seven times! Surely Naaman

would have been willing to do something 12 times more difficult to be healed. What could it hurt? So Naaman relented, dipped seven times in the Jordan River and immediately found his disease healed. His skin was as smooth as a baby's bottom. Naaman, the great, once-proud general, discovered the power of the Lord and how small he was before that power...he vowed he would worship no other god. Meanwhile, Naaman tried to give the buckets of money to Elisha in gratitude for his healing. Elisha didn't want it. Elisha didn't need it. The grace of God cannot be bought!

This story is a bit funny in places, but it teaches us much. Part of what we learn is that many people who think they are great...are really small before the Lord. They really are helpless, regardless of their self-importance. But did you notice the cast of characters...the people who were so unimportant that they aren't even named, people who...through their small acts of kindness were necessary for Naaman's healing? There was a little slave girl. We'll never know her name. Naaman's wife had a part. Naaman's servants took some risk of incurring the wrath of an already angry man...to get him to turn and wash in Jordan's waters. Did you notice how much they all cared enough to do something? They didn't do much. But they did something. Had they done nothing, Naaman would not have been healed. And who would know that our God is an awesome God?

I look out over this congregation, and I see no great generals, no kings or presidents. No CEOs of great corporations. No body builders, no great professors or authors or movie stars here. Just a room full of people who are simply trying to get through the day. In the kingdom of God, there are no small people. There are only great people with small roles to play, small acts of kindness anyone can be capable of. I know you can't do everything to cure the problems of the world. We live in days of great worry and care, a world of political and religious backstabbing, a world in which 15 million children (*15 million children!!*) die of hunger every year, a world in which 3 billion people try to live on less than \$2 a day. We live in a world in which adults abuse and neglect children and husbands abuse wives. Too many people are jobless and homeless. I know you can't do everything to cure the problems of the world. But you can do something kind for someone. That's where it all begins. You can't do something all the time, but you can do it here or there. You can't love everybody today. But today you can find one person to care for. And in doing that, you are playing a small role in a great scheme God's love. You are like people poking pinholes in the darkness, one at a time. And if enough of us can poke enough pinholes, the world will see that our God is an awesome God. And they will see what Naaman saw, that the Kingdom of God has drawn near.

The good news is that by the cross of Jesus Christ, God has come reaching down into us, stirring us to be the people of God, great people doing small things. God is

acting. God is coming. God is saving. God is love, one pinhole at a time. Before us is the food of God, small pieces of bread, small cups of wine, capable of inspiring us to great things. By God's grace they become great..so that we can become great.