

God Bless the Outcast

Rev. Durrell Watkins, MA, MDiv

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After my break up with my first boyfriend many moons ago, I turned to my great-aunt Gladys for comfort. Crying, I told her how I had given my heart to a scoundrel and I was afraid that with the exception of yours truly, men were pigs. I expected her to assure me that that there were other fish in the sea, or that there is good in everyone, or time heals all wounds...some useless cliché. But instead what she said was, "Honey, the one thing I've learned in life is that anything with a key or a Y chromosome is going to give you trouble."

Well, that first beau wasn't the last one I had to cast out of my daily life, but as far as I know they all went on to do pretty well and I certainly ended up with the right one for me.

I actually want to focus on some outcasts today from our first reading: people who are barely mentioned but who make a huge difference in someone's life.

Usually, Naaman is considered the star of this story, but I'm that not that impressed with him. His trials have somehow not made him mindful of the needs of others. He isn't sympathetic to the plight of the oppressed; in fact, he willingly participates in systems of oppression. He feels entitled to his privilege and he insists on maintaining it no matter who it hurts. Naaman is not the most attractive character in this story.

Now, the army in which Naaman is a general had enslaved a young girl from the Northern Kingdom of Israel. And Naaman is not only part of an army that will take non-combatants captive, he personally is benefiting from the practice. He has taken this slave girl and put her into service in his own home. The writer of this story doesn't even give this poor girl a name. In fact, even the woman who enjoys the privileges of her class isn't named. Naaman's wife (as she is known) isn't a wealthy woman; she is the wife of a wealthy man.

Naaman could have, perhaps should have used his wealth and position to bring about change in his society, to help end the practice of slavery, to help improve the conditions of women in his culture, to at least use his voice to challenge the inequities. He could have used his privilege to include more kinds of people, instead of using people to protect his privilege. But he didn't; and our unnamed friends this morning show us a more noble way.

The slave-girl speaks to Naaman's wife. Notice that conversation begins with the unnamed. Religion and government and tradition have not recognized these two people as having a voice to raise, and so they must find their own voice and begin the life-changing conversation amongst themselves. The one unnamed woman, goes to the other and says, "I know that the man who thinks he owns us is ill. And I think I know of someone who could help him. There is a prophet in Samaria who has been known to help people who are ill."

The message apparently is passed on to Naaman who is certainly willing to pay a visit to someone who can offer him some relief. And we don't hear from the girl again or the wife.

After going through the appropriate diplomatic channels to enter into Israel, Naaman goes right to Elisha's house. Elisha sends a messenger with the prescription for Naaman. Go bathe in the River...immerse yourself 7 times and you'll be good as new."

But Naaman almost misses his miracle. He feels so entitled to his privilege, his position, his title, that he is furious that Elisha sent a messenger instead of greeting him in person. I don't know why Elisha didn't come out...maybe he's shy. Maybe he's socially awkward. Maybe he's busy. Maybe he doesn't want Naaman to think the miracle is about him...Naaman has to do the work to get the benefit, and what does it matter who he hears that bit of news from? Elisha sent word

about what Naaman could do to help himself. Elisha probably thinks he's done enough. But Naaman needed some bowing and scraping...well, that's what he wanted. What he needed was healing, and Elisha had made sure he had access to that.

Just as the insulted Naaman is about to refuse to take a dip in the muddy waters of the Jordan, his servants, probably more slaves in fact, come to him and say, "So you wade around in some muddy water...there's a chance it might help, and it couldn't hurt. Are you really going to let pride keep you from at least giving healing a chance?"

Finally, Naaman reluctantly goes into the River, immerses himself 7 times (7 is the numerological symbol for wholeness or perfection in scripture), and sure enough, he is healed.

Now, look at who made the miracle possible:

1. **An unnamed slave-girl.** Taken from her home, her country, her culture, forced into service and any number of indignities that aren't mentioned in the story; but the one thing that invading armies or oppressors of any stripe cannot take from her is her view of herself. She has agency. She has dignity. She has sacred value. She can offer a word of healing even to the person who doesn't recognize her humanity. He can rob her of her liberty, but not of her power to choose to be who she wants to be in any situation. He can make her be a slave, but he can't rob her of her compassion, her humanity, her knowledge that even in the most difficult of situations she has something to offer. He can't make her share his low opinion of her. Because she knows she was more than her circumstances, she contributes to someone's healing.

2. **An unnamed wife.** She has no status apart from her husband. She enjoys some creature comforts, but she is not given respect. She could be bitter. She could try to make herself feel important by being mean to the slave-girl. She could say, "how dare you presume to give me advice?!" She could be angry with her husband and say, "you know, he doesn't care so much about me, why should I pass on this information that might help him." But she chooses to say, "Even if the world doesn't know who I am, I get to know...I can choose to contribute at my own level to the story of life, and I can choose to be kinder than others have been to me." She passes the information on to her husband, and she is part of his healing.

3. **Elisha, the Samaritan.** Samaritans have a different Temple than the Southern people of Judah. They have different rituals. They've been more willing to mix with other peoples. The racism of their southern neighbors will eventually brand Samaritans as undesirable. They will endure ethnic and religious prejudice and we see that in the gospels. But in this story, it is a Samaritan who sends word to Naaman about how he can get better. He didn't do it exactly the way Naaman wanted, but who wants surgery? Who wants chemo? Who wants to exercise? Who wants to quit smoking, or decrease their sodium intake, or be stuck with needles...sometimes the healing comes in ways we didn't necessarily want. But we give them a try, because why limit the ways that healing might come? Elisha the Samaritan does what he can, is willing to do something, and is part of Naaman's healing.

4. **The other unnamed servants.** They confront Naaman's classist attitude. They remind him, "Look, you can be arrogant if you want to, or you can do what this guy has suggested and see if it works. Arrogance probably won't cure you; his method might. The choice is yours." They let their compassion over ride their fear...Naaman could have punished them for speaking up to him, but they didn't want to see him suffer; so they risked his wrath to help him help himself. Because they were willing to speak up, they were part of Naaman's healing.

After an unnamed slave-girl, an unnamed wife, a Samaritan prophet, and more unnamed servants each did something, each took a risk, each gave what they could, each found their own voice, each believed enough in themselves to know they had something to offer...after each of the outcasts dared to believe that they were more than outcasts...then a chain reaction occurred that benefited Naaman. Of course, **Naaman** had to participate in his miracle, but if all the others hadn't done their part, he wouldn't have done his...and there would have been no healing.

Have you ever felt like an outcast? Has "love the sinner but hate the sin" rhetoric (as if judging someone to be a sinner could be loving) left you feeling hurt, abandoned, unwanted,

misunderstood? Has sexism, or racism, or classism, or homophobia, or poverty, or illness, or an abusive relationship, or divorce, or mistakes from the past, or the condemnations of family, religion, or government left you feeling as if you don't matter, or that you don't matter as much as others? I can't promise that "they" will change their attitudes or their behavior. I can't say that the condition will radically change or the situation will miraculously improve. We always hope, but things don't always happen on our time table. What I can say is that belief is a choice and we can choose to believe that God believes in us. A church or a political party or a family or a job may have cast us out, but the unconditional and all-inclusive love of God will never cast us out. We can claim our voice, our agency, our sacred value right here and right now and we can speak up and we can offer our gifts and we can know that our doing what we can is contributing to a chain reaction that is blessing someone, somewhere today. And as we know ourselves to be a blessing, we will, of course, feel blessed ourselves.

God does bless the outcast and uses the outcast to bless the world. This is the good news.
Amen.

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*I am never outside of God's love.
God's healing spirit flows through me.
God's prospering power flows through me.
God's abundant joy flows through me.
I am blessed.
And I am a blessing to the world.
Amen.*

"Do something new – or at least different – every day. Know that life is never stuck, stagnant, or stale, for each moment is ever new and fresh." Louise Hay

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