



The Most Fascinating People: Naaman

TEXT
2 Kings 5:1-19

July 26, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

In 2006, Charles Carl Roberts walked into an Amish schoolhouse in Pennsylvania with three weapons. Before the day had ended, he had shot 11 girls between the ages of 6 and 13, leaving five of them dead. As common as such gun violence is in our country, folks struggled to make sense of this senseless violence. No one knew what to do but the Amish. Within a few days, representatives of the Amish community, believing that they were demonstrating the love of Christ who calls his followers to love our enemies, went to Charles Roberts' family — not to seek revenge, but to offer forgiveness.

We saw it again in Charleston, as brokenhearted family members of those gunned down had to choose who to trust. Do they trust the life of Jesus, who calls for forgiveness, or do they trust the tidal wave of anger that calls for revenge?

We will see how folks respond in Louisiana after this past week's shooting. And we will wait for the next time, for it will happen again.

These moments stick with me because I wonder how we would react if it were to happen here. Offering forgiveness is not the only response people of faith

might have toward such tragedy, but it is one response.

All of this reminds us that following Jesus is not easy. Even when I seek to be faithful, my life seems to be a compromise. The way of Jesus is not our normal way. His way of seeing the neighbor as important as the self is not our normal choice. His way of always doing what God wants rather than what he wants is not our normal choice. His way of letting love shape every moment, of bearing the cross, of turning the cheek, of seeking justice is not our normal choice.

We try, but at the end of the day, our best efforts are a compromise.

Naaman is the commander of the Aramean or Syrian Army, the enemy army. Naaman had military victory, but Naaman also had leprosy. Naaman goes to great lengths to find healing. He discovers that it is Yahweh, Israel's God, who can change his life.

It's a funny scene as Naaman travels to the king of Israel seeking healing. The king assumes he is as good as dead, since he can't heal leprosy.

Then Naaman is summoned by Elisha the prophet, who doesn't even come out of the house. Elisha just sends the

butler out to give Naaman instructions. Naaman is offended. *I thought for me he would come out and call on the name of the Lord, wave his hand, throw some wuffle dust and say a "shazam" or two on my behalf.*

In spite of Naaman's enemy status, and in spite of his pride, he finds healing. When God chooses to show blessing, your being the enemy of God's people is no barrier. God loves everybody.

But the moment in the story that captures me is when Naaman thinks about going back to Syria. There is a curious detail in the narrative. Naaman, before he goes home, asks to take some dirt with him. He says, "I now know that there are no other gods, but the God of Israel."

But there is a problem: Naaman is Aramean. Naaman has had an experience of God; he has seen things; he has come to understand things anew. But he is also Aramean. He is like the Arameans, but he is also no longer like them. So before he goes back to Aram, he needs some dirt — a little holy ground. I don't know if he used that dirt to set up space for an altar, if he scattered it around his block, creating a holy zip code, or if each morning he reached into the sack and sprinkled a little in his shoes

in order to remember that he was walking on holy ground.

What I do know is that he was Aramean, and Aram used to be home; but it's not home anymore. I think sometimes the more clear we get about the life of Jesus, the more we understand the call of Jesus, the less we feel at home.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's wonderful novel *The Namesake*, she tells of a Bengali family who immigrate to the U.S. They leave what was home and try to discover home in a new land. It is complicated because it doesn't take long in the new country to feel a little strange when going back to the old country. But there is enough Bengali in them to struggle to feel at home in the U.S. Ashima is the mother of this family, and she describes her new life this way:

Being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy — a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is ... a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding.¹

I wonder if Naaman would describe his new life this way. He has discovered God, but realizes that the world in which he lives doesn't align with the ways of God. He can neither deny the way of God nor can he deny the ways of his world. He says, "When I go back, and I have to escort the king of Syria into the sanctuary of the God Rimmon, and I bow down in the sanctuary

of Rimmon, may the Lord pardon your servant on this one count."

Do you understand what he is asking? He is saying: *These are my people, but my faith means I do not fit in with them. So when I go back, and my life fails to show the difference my faith makes, when my life fails to show my fidelity to God, when I go and live where everyone is worshipping another God, can you pardon my being there?*

The work of grace in his life makes him a foreigner in his own land. And his struggle to be faithful will be imperfect, ending with mixed results.

When Naaman requests this pardon, we might expect the prophet to quote the commandments: "You shall have no other gods before me." Or the Torah: "You shall be holy as the Lord your God is holy." But no, in one of the most amazing moments of all the Old Testament, the prophet of God says, "Go in peace." *Go in peace.*

One of the things this passage names is the honest struggle. Sometimes the clearer we get about God's call in our lives, the more complicated how we are to live becomes, because we no longer feel at home. There is a new kingdom toward which we are living.

Here's what I think. I think we all live in the shadow of the house of Rimmon. We all live in a world that is so different from the life that Jesus talked about that it can seem God is a long way away. So we all need a little holy ground, a little dirt sprinkled in our shoes to remind us how we are to walk in this world.

A friend of mine once said to me: "Tom, I love coming to church, but I'm not sure what to do with it. I feel alive with what we talk about here. But I have to confess, when I go to work on Monday, the values and life there seem so far from what we talk about on Sunday, it seems like they are two different worlds." He said, "I'm trying to figure out how to bring the faith with me to work." I think he was saying, "I need two mule loads of dirt."

You may have seen that Senator John Danforth will be with us in October. I remember the last time he was here, he talked about a time he attended services on Ash Wednesday. You know that service; it includes the imposition of ashes on one's forehead. Danforth is not only a senator, but also an Episcopal priest.

Danforth said that, after the service, he returned to his car as he was going back to work. But first he took his handkerchief and cleaned his forehead. He said he was embarrassed to go to work with the sign of his faith on his forehead. He sensed the distance between worship and work and was embarrassed to show the world he had been to church. But once he removed the sign of his faith, he was more troubled. He was embarrassed that he had been embarrassed by his faith.² He had a chance to take some dirt with him, but he left it behind.

Do you know what it is like to sometimes live caught between those embarrassments?

Naaman realizes that this is what grace does to us. It reorders what is important in our lives.

We no longer fit easily in our culture. And we discover that once grace has touched us, we aren't at home anymore — because our home is in the kingdom that Jesus talked about, and we aren't there yet. So we must make the best choices we know to make, even recognizing they are imperfect.

I have shared with you before one of my favorite moments in Sue Monk Kidd's book *The Secret Life of Bees*. Lily finds herself living with some sisters, all named after the warmer months, with August being the matriarch and May being the most in need. These wonderful women welcomed into their home a 14-year-old runaway named Lily. The house is pink, and one day Lily asks August about it.

Lily asks, "How come if your favorite color is blue, you painted your house so pink?"

[August] laughed. "That was May's doing. She was with me the day I went to the paint store to pick out the color. I had a nice tan color in mind, but May latched on to this sample called Caribbean Pink. She said it made her feel like dancing a Spanish flamenco. I thought, "Well, this is the tackiest color I've ever seen, and we'll have half the town talking about us, but if it can lift May's heart like that, I guess she ought to live inside it."

"All this time I just figured you liked pink," I said.

She laughed again. "You know, some things don't matter that much, Lily. Like the color of a house. How big is that in

the overall scheme of life? But lifting a person's heart — now, that matters. The whole problem with people is ..."

"They don't know what matters and what doesn't," I said.

"I was gonna say, the problem is they *know* what matters, but they don't *choose* it. ... I love May, but it was still so hard to choose Caribbean Pink. The hardest thing on earth is choosing what matters."³

I think what we are doing here is trying to remind ourselves what matters and then trying to encourage one another to choose what matters. And to see again, week after week, that there are others here who are doing the same; we are not alone.

I think what we are doing here is trying to learn how to carry some dirt, some holy ground, from Jesus back into our lives. Following Jesus means that we look at our world and realize we are in one sense never really at home. We live in a particular zip code, but grace has sprinkled holy ground from another kingdom into our shoes. It makes us walk differently.

So as we go, let's be honest. Our lives will be a mixture of faith and failure, of fidelity and fear. We will be imperfect. The lives we offer God will be a compromise, but choose the best you know how to do ... and go in peace.

¹Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake* (2003), p. 49

²He told this story at Village. He was talking about his book, in which this story can be

found. John Danforth, *Faith and Politics* (2006), p. 56

³Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002), p. 146

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.