



Character Requires Courage

TEXT
2 Kings 5:1-19

March 31, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Every couple of years, I have us revisit this story of Naaman, the Syrian general. I think it is one of the more important stories in the Bible. Naaman is a man of power, but Naaman has a problem. He has a skin disease. Through an odd collection of circumstances, he finds himself standing in the driveway of the prophet Elisha seeking healing, a healing that he receives.

That could be the end of the story, but it's not. It continues, and if I understand the text, this is where the story becomes important. Rather than making everything right in Naaman's life, Naaman's healing makes life more complicated. Why? Because before, his healing God was simply Elisha's God, but now Naaman has been touched by grace, and he knows that God is his God. He wants to be faithful to the God who has shown him grace. "I now know there is no God in all the earth except the God of Israel."

OK. But that's the complication for Naaman, for he will return to a world that does not serve God. That is the way it is sometimes. Sometimes the calling of our faith is out of sync with the larger culture. It can leave

us feeling a bit lonely. So, Naaman asks for pardon, because he knows his life will be a compromise, a mixed bag of faithfulness and failure — because the world in which he lives does not always respect the ways of God. "Pardon me when I stumble," he prays.

And Elisha says, "Go in peace." I value this story of Naaman because life is messy and complicated.

She said everything was going to be just perfect. Every detail had been addressed; everything was going to be perfect. It was an outdoor wedding, and I was new enough in ministry that I didn't realize that I was already in trouble. I was talking with the mother of the bride, and she had spent much of the past year devoting every waking minute to wedding preparation. She loved her daughter and wanted it to be the perfect day. With regard to the things she could control, which were considerable, they were.

It was set in a grove of azaleas. Lines of white wooden folding chairs stood at attention. Hurricane lanterns marked the entrance. Magnolia blossoms were tied to the end of the rows of white chairs and scattered down the aisle. A string quartet played Pachelbel. It was stunning and to me seemed to be perfect.

We were about to begin when we felt the temperature drop. And then, out of nowhere, you could hear raindrops landing like water balloons. And then it was upon us: It seemed like a firetruck had turned its hose on this azalea garden. Everyone dashed for cars. We really didn't pay attention to whose car, just get out of the rain. Through the windows, we watched the rain pool in the chairs. Then the hail began to shatter the hurricane lamps. The magnolia blossoms were beaten down.

In the rush to cover, I ended up on the back seat of a car where the front seat was occupied by the mother of the bride. She peered out the window at the perfect wedding. She looked at me and said, "Can't you do anything about this?"

I said, "No ma'am, this is management. I'm just public relations."

"Well, it's just ruined," she said.

Well, it wasn't. The rain passed. We found our spots. No one sat, but it wasn't a long service. And by dinnertime, they were husband and wife.

Things don't always go as planned at weddings. More importantly, things don't always go as planned in marriages either,

or in parenting, or at work, or in friendships, or even in being church together.

Sometimes your train jumps the tracks. Life is messy. And it is my experience that when life gets complicated, it becomes more challenging to be our best self. It is tempting to take a lower road, as the high road feels riskier. So, we are going to need some courage along the way.

We have been talking about character for a few weeks. I shared with you a couple weeks ago, I was instructed by David Brooks' reflection that there is a difference between what he calls resumé virtues and eulogy virtues. Do you remember that?

Brooks defines resumé virtues as those skills and characteristics that we develop to be successful in life. They are important. These are the virtues that we hone to be good at our job; to succeed in life; to make a mark in the world — at least professionally. But eulogy virtues are different. They are about the relationships that you create.

I know a bit about that. Three times this past week, some from our Village family gathered together with broken hearts. We needed to recite "The Lord is my shepherd ..." and sing *Abide With Me*, and to hear again the promise of the resurrection. So many of you know that exact moment. And what we remember in that moment is less the accomplishments and more the love. For this is the truth of us: We are who we love. That is what defines our lives: We are who we love. The eulogy virtues speak not to what we have ac-

complished, but to who and how we have loved.

And here's the tension. You may experience this differently, but this is what I see. We live in a culture that questions the power of love. We live in a culture that prioritizes resumé virtues and accomplishments. Our culture tells us we are competitors. Our culture tells us we need to win, and that problems are all to be fixed to live a perfect life.

But that life doesn't exist. Life is messy for everyone at times. And when it is, staying true to your faith, staying true to love, prioritizing relationships, that requires some courage.

But here's the thing about courage: Sometimes others see it in us before we see it in ourselves. It's a little bit like patience. Are you a patient person? Patience is something I struggle with. I get impatient at traffic lights. I get impatient when it's the end of March and it's still snowing. If I go to get coffee and blonde roast is only available by pour-over, that's like a major setback in my week. But here's the thing: Even I can practice patience at times. Because being patient is not something we feel. Patience is how we treat others. And the irony is, when we practice patience, we are probably feeling impatient.

Courage is a bit like that. We don't always feel courageous — but it can be courageous to choose the good, even when life is a mess. It takes courage to prioritize relationships.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was captured during World War II and placed in Tegel prison camp. He

was executed just days before the allied forces liberated his camp. He wrote a lot while in prison — some letters, some sermons, some poems. One poem is titled "Who Am I?"

*Who am I? They often tell me
I stepped from my cell's confinement
Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
Like a Squire from his country
house.*

*Who am I? They often tell me
I used to speak to my warders
freely and friendly and clearly,
as through it were mine to command.*

*Who am I? They also tell me
I bore the days of misfortune
equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.*

*Am I then really that
which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I myself
know of myself?
Restless and longing and
sick, like a bird in a cage,
Struggling for breath, as
though hands were compressing
My throat, yearning for colors,
for flowers, for the voices of birds,
thirsting for words of kindness,
for neighborliness.*

I love the honesty of Bonhoeffer's confession. He felt weak and needy, but others saw him as courageous. Sometimes that's what courage looks like. I think Naaman is pointing to that. For living faithful to God, choosing love in a culture that is suspicious of love, requires courage, and Naaman knows life will be a compromise.

On September 30, 1982, a news story broke: Seven people in Chicago had died from contamination of Tylenol. Overnight Johnson & Johnson, the com-

pany that distributed medicine, became a company that distributed poison, as capsules of Extra Strength Tylenol had been laced with cyanide.

Within a few days, James Burke, the president of Johnson & Johnson, flew to Washington, D.C., to meet with the FDA and the FBI. They recommended that the Tylenol be recalled in the Chicago area, but not beyond that, as they did not wish to create a panic.

Burke ignored the advice. At a greater cost to his company, he ordered a nationwide recall, costing Johnson & Johnson over \$100,000,000. Daniel Coyle, in writing about this occasion says, “Over the next days and weeks, Johnson & Johnson essentially transformed itself from a pharmaceutical company into a public safety organization.”¹ Within six weeks, they redesigned their packaging, introducing tamper-proof safety packaging that is everywhere today. When asked why they responded so aggressively to this crisis, Burke said, “Our first responsibility is the people we serve, their safety, their health.”

I think that was courageous. Now, it worked out for Johnson & Johnson, but the point is, character is revealed in who you choose to be when you don’t know how things will work out. It is about who you are when you are not in control, when you are not going to win. It takes courage to prioritize people, relationships, even love.

You see, when things go wrong, it’s more tempting to set virtues aside.

In Robert Dugoni’s novel *The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell*, Sam Hell is born with ocular albinism; his eyes were red. As a result, Sam lived his life knowing what it is to never quite fit in. In school, he was bullied terribly, both by students and by unenlightened administrators.

But he was bright and in high school had the best grades in his class. But the school administration had trouble imagining a kid with red eyes giving the valedictorian address, so they elected Sam’s best friend Ernie — a popular kid, but not nearly the student — as the school’s valedictorian.

That night at dinner, Sam told his parents he didn’t get the recognition. He said he was fine, but he wasn’t. Sam’s dad, Max, said, “When we finish dinner, we should call Ernie and congratulate him.”

But Sam’s mother lost it. After 18 years of fighting for her child, this was the last straw. It broke her heart that once again her child was treated unfairly. “No, this is not OK,” she said, crying tears of anger. “Those members of the board are all cowards; they are all cowards.”

Max said, “Let’s not be ungracious.”

“Why not? Everyone else is.”²

It feels that way too often, like we are living in a world devoid of graciousness. Like we are living in a world of hostility, a world that has lost confidence in the power of love, a world that celebrates our divisions, a world that has wandered a long way from the teaching of Christ.

And the truth is, if we wish to live a life that prioritizes love in society, it will take courage.

It will happen to you this week. Messiness or ugliness or entitlement will abound. When you encounter that, do your best to choose grace. Do the best you can to choose love. It will likely be a compromise, but do your best — and then remember the promise of the prophet, and go in peace.

¹Daniel Coyle, *The Culture Code* (2018), p. 176. All of the information about this situation is found in Coyle’s book, pp. 174–178.

²Robert Dugoni, *The Remarkable Life of Sam Hell* (2018), pp. 267–268

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.