PATTING OURSELVES ON THE BACK
A Sermon by Rev. Coleman S. Glenn
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This morning we read the story of Naaman, commander of the army of Syria. It is also the story of Gehazi, servant of the prophet Elisha. We all have within us something of Naaman and something of Gehazi, and if we look at the trajectory of the two characters, we can learn about what it means to truly humble ourselves and repent.

We begin with Naaman. Naaman was the commander of the army of Syria – a man with power and authority. And yet, he had leprosy. In a good sense, Syria represents deep knowledges of goodness and truth; but in a negative sense, Syria represents those knowledges falsified and profaned. Leprosy represented profanation, so a Syrian commander with leprosy is a picture of those parts of ourselves where we do know something about how we ought to live, but we've twisted it into something harmful.

To take an example – maybe there's part of us that has come to understand that in order to care for others, we have to take care of ourselves. That's true, and it's important to recognize its truth. But it is easy for us to use that truth to actually put ourselves ABOVE others, to seek things that bring us pleasure not for the sake of being able to serve others better, but simply to gratify ourselves. When that truth becomes twisted in us, falsity and truth are mixed. The Word calls this mixing profanation, and the consequence of profanation in those days was leprosy.

Or to take another example – it is a truth that we ought to zealously stand up for what is right, to defend the helpless from harm. We can know this truth and twist that knowledge, though – we tear someone down, we try to hurt someone who has hurt us, all in the name of zeal and defense when actually what we are trying to do is attack and demean. We have this genuine, fairly deep truth – and we have profaned it by applying it to let us stay in our selfish ways.

The knowledges represented by Syria in a good sense are deeper knowledges connected to goodness and truth – they are not mere factual knowledges. Because of this, it is easy for us, when we're thinking from that Naaman part of ourselves, to think of ourselves as superior and to look down on people who don't understand things the way we do. In particular, we might find ourselves looking down on people who take the Word very literally – who insist that God is *actually* angry and punishing, who await a literal return of Jesus, who focus on external acts of charity rather than the spirit that motivates them.

With this in mind, it's not hard to understand what takes place in the story. Naaman had been told of a great prophet in Israel who could cure his leprosy. Now, for all Naaman's faults, at least he knew he needed healing. And so he went to the house of Elisha, expecting Elisha to come out and perform a great miracle befitting a man of Naaman's station.

But of course, that isn't what happened. Elisha didn't come out at all. Instead, he sent out a messenger with a simple message for Naaman: go wash seven times in the Jordan River. At this, Naaman went away furious. There were far better rivers in Syria than the insignificant Jordan River!

The Jordan River represents simple, basic truths from the literal sense of the Word. If we think of ourselves as possessing deeper, more subtle knowledge, it can be startling to be told that these will not be the source of our healing. Instead, we will be healed by something far more ordinary: by living the basic truths of the Lord's Word, again and again, until we have formed a new habit. It's not dramatic. It's not exciting. But this is the only thing that will change us.

Fortunately for Naaman, his servants were wiser than him. They pointed out to him that he would have done what Elisha had said if it had been great. Why not this simple thing, then? And Naaman had the humility to do it. He went to the Jordan River. He washed seven times. And he was made clean. It says that "his flesh returned as the flesh of a little lad." The great, prideful man was reduced to the humble state of a child or a servant.

What does this look like practically? To return to a previous example, remember the person who has been justifying their anger by claiming it is zeal, a desire to protect what is good. That person might be called to go to the Word and look at the commandment against murder. In the broader natural sense, not murdering includes not harming anyone with one's words. The person makes a commitment, not thinking it is likely to make a huge difference: they will not tear anyone down in their conversations, even if it feels like the person deserves it.

If they actually do it – again and again, forming a habit, while praying to the Lord for help – they start to notice something remarkable. They can start to distinguish within themselves the feeling of genuine zeal – that desire to protect – from the feeling of contempt and revenge. A simple, basic change in actions can change their thought process, change their perceptions. For all they might have thought of themselves as having more advanced knowledge, they are brought to the humble realization that they are healed the same way everyone else is.

This is a gift from the Lord. When Naaman went to Elisha to pay him, Elisha refused payment. This is not a transaction, where we do good and the Lord owes us something in return.

Instead, it is a gift that the Lord is continually offering us, and our actions simply allow us to receive it.

But that's not the end of the story. Remember, we are looking at this as a story of two characters. So far we've been following the story of Naaman, commander of the Syrian army. But now we shift to Gehazi. Naaman begins as a great man and is reduced to the humble state of a servant, a lad. Gehazi, by contrast, is literally a servant, a lad. He is the servant of the prophet Elisha.

The Writings do not tell us what Gehazi represents in particular. But as a servant, he represents something lower in our minds; and as a servant of a prophet who spoke the Word of God, he represents something lower in our minds that allows us to take the higher truths of the Word and put them into practice. We can maybe think of Gehazi as representing the natural level of our minds, the part of us where we most strongly feel like we are the source of the good actions and good decisions in our mind.

In this particular story, then, Gehazi might represent the part of our minds that has resolved to live by the Lord's Word, the part of our mind that says, "OK, I'm going to simply, literally not slander anyone." It's a vital part of our mind – this servant part is what allows us to come to the Jordan and bathe seven times, what allows us to make a conscious change.

But there is a trap. After Elisha refused payment and Naaman began his journey back to Syria, Gehazi seemed almost indignant that Elisha had refused payment. At the very least, Gehazi saw an opportunity to get something for himself out of the transaction. And after all, why not? If Naaman was willing to give away some of his wealth, what harm could there be in taking it?

And so Gehazi ran after Naaman and made up a story: Elisha had guests he wanted to give gifts to. Could Naaman give Gehazi a talent of silver and two changes of clothes? Naaman insisted on giving Gehazi TWO talents of silver along with the two changes of clothes.

This is something quite common when we go through the process of repentance. Naaman starts off exemplifying a pride in one's intelligence. This pride is brought down as we realize we will need to live by more simple truths. We do so, and we see a change. But here is where we need to watch out for another kind of pride, another kind of self-congratulation. When we choose to make a change, we have to put in an effort, and to every appearance, that effort comes from ourselves. If we buy into that image, we start to think that we have *earned* something, that we are *owed* something, for the change we have made. The idea of merit starts to creep in.

And this seems to be what Gehazi represents. That part of our mind where we most strongly feel life to come from ourselves wants recognition and reward for our willingness to change. The silver and changes of clothes represent higher and lower truth; the pairing of them as two talents of silver and two changes of clothes illustrates higher and lower truths conjoined to life. It is very good to join truth to life, of course! But when we start to claim these things for ourselves, we end up falling into the same trap we did before.

Think of the rich young ruler from our New Testament story this morning. He had done almost everything right – he lived according to the commandments, and it says that Jesus, looking at him, loved him. But he lacked one thing: he needed to sell what he had, give to the poor, and follow Jesus, taking up the cross. We read about what this means in *Apocalypse Explained*:

> "'To sell all that he had' signifies that he should…relinquish the things that were his own [proprium], which were loving self and the world more than God, and thus leading himself; and 'to follow the Lord' signifies to acknowledge Him only and to be led by Him." (*Apocalypse Explained* 934)

For the good we do to be effective, it needs to come with this acknowledgment that even our efforts at goodness themselves are gifts from the Lord.

Gehazi does not make this acknowledgment. He follows an opposite track to that of Naaman. If Naaman represents a humbling of the knowledge-seeking parts of our mind as we realize that knowledge means nothing unless we act, Gehazi shows the danger of patting ourselves on the back for acting in the right way – from being a servant, he puffs himself up, thinking about what he is owed. Our lesson from *Arcana Coelestia* explained the problems with such an attitude, where a person places merit in overcoming in spiritual struggles:

> "A person is not saved on account of temptations if he places anything of merit in them; for if he does this, it is from the love of self, in that he congratulates himself on their account, and believes that he has merited heaven more than others, and at the same time he is thinking of his own preeminence over others by despising others in comparison with himself; all of which things are contrary to mutual love, and therefore to heavenly blessedness." (*Arcana Coelestia* n. 2273)

If we do this, we are no better off than when we started – the leprosy, the profanation of truth, simply shifts from the Naaman within us to the Gehazi within us.

So what are we to do? Simply being aware that we will have this tendency to claim merit for spiritual progress is helpful – we know to watch out for it. And we can also take comfort from

knowing that to some extent, we will not be able to help feeling as if our efforts at change belong to ourselves. The book of Genesis recounts how Joseph, shortly before revealing himself and being reconciled to his brothers, planted money and his silver cup in the bags of his brothers, so that his brothers inadvertently stole from him. We read in *Arcana Coelestia* of the internal sense of this:

> "The truth which is gifted by the Lord is first received as if it were not gifted; for before regeneration the person supposes that he procures truth for himself, and so long as he supposes this he is in spiritual theft… Until a person has been regenerated he cannot but so believe. He does indeed say with his lips from doctrine that all the truth of faith and good of charity are from the Lord, yet he does not believe it until faith has been implanted in good, when for the first time he acknowledges it from the heart." (*Arcana Coelestia* 5747)

At first, we cannot acknowledge in our hearts that everything good is from the Lord. But we *can* acknowledge it in our minds, and we are called to do so, over and over again. Joseph's brothers immediately offer to give everything back that they have inadvertently stolen.

To some extent, we will not be able to avoid the feeling that we are owed something for making an effort to follow the Lord. But we can guard against indulging this. When the feeling comes up, we can acknowledge it, but we do not have to let it go running after Naaman demanding payment. Instead, when we have that sense of merit, we can turn our minds to the Lord. We can thank Him for everything He has given us as a gift. We can ask Him to free us from the illusion that we have merited anything on our own. And we can offer ourselves as humble servants, undeserving but eternally grateful for all the gifts and the healing that He has offered us. *Amen.*

Lessons: 2 Kings 5; Mark 10:17-22; *Arcana Coelestia* 2273

Arcana Coelestia 2273. A person is not saved on account of temptations if he places anything of merit in them; for if he does this, it is from the love of self, in that he congratulates himself on their account, and believes that he has merited heaven more than others, and at the same time he is thinking of his own preeminence over others by despising others in comparison with himself; all of which things are contrary to mutual love, and therefore to heavenly blessedness. The temptations in which a person overcomes are attended with a belief that all others are more worthy than himself, and that he is hellish rather than heavenly; for while in temptations such ideas are presented to him; and therefore when after temptations he comes into thoughts contrary to these, it is an indication that he has not overcome; for the thoughts which the person has had in temptations are those to which can be bent the thoughts which he has after the temptations; and if the latter cannot be bent to the former, the person has either yielded in the temptation, or he again

comes into similar ones, and sometimes into more grievous ones, until he has been reduced to such sanity that he believes he has merited nothing.