

## Faith Healing

A Sermon by Rev. Cal Chinn  
July 7, 2019



### *2 Kings 5:1-14*

*5Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. 2Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. 3She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." 4So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. 5And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. 6He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." 7When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." 8But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel."*

*9So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. 10Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." 11But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! 12Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. 13But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean?'" 14So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.*

THE FIRST FAITH HEALING REVIVAL I EVER ATTENDED was in 1971 in Medford, Oregon. At the time I was the Associate Pastor at the First Presbyterian Church, and a member of the congregation who belonged to the Full Gospel Men's Luncheon insisted that I attend a Friday evening revival which featured a nationally known faith healer. At the revival I witnessed the usual in-firmed persons who came forward to be healed—a man whose left leg was shorter than his right leg; a woman who suffered chronic back pains; another man who was hard of hearing. All of these people were miraculously healed of their infirmity by the touch of the hand and the spoken prayer of the faith healer. My skepticism was confirmed when I noticed an elderly couple slowly

making their way up the aisle to the chancel area where the faith healer was. The old couple were clearly mentally compromised. But before they could reach the faith healer, they were intercepted by the ushers and taken outside into the hallway. I snuck out of my seat to the hallway to see what was happening; and I witnessed the ushers trying to persuade this elderly couple that the faith healer would not be able to help them. That experience confirmed for me that there is more to healing than meets the eye.

I AM WONDERING whether it is more than a coincidence that today's reading from 2 Kings falls on the 4th of July weekend, a holiday which glorifies nationalism and patriotism. Independence Day invites displays of power and might—Blue Angels flying over and Abrams Tanks parked in front of the Lincoln Memorial. Naaman commanded the army of Syria and was a mighty warrior, a man of both physical strength and personal charisma. Naaman's war machine expanded its power and control through raids into Israel; and the captives who were deported from the land of Israel included a little girl. This little girl joins a chorus of unnamed women in the Hebrew Bible. The contrast of power flavors the very beginning of the story. There is a "*but*" not only at the beginning of the story, but throughout. Naaman, the mighty warrior, also had been struck by leprosy. The mighty warrior can orchestrate raiding parties that bring back slaves, **BUT** he cannot cure skin disease.

REMEDY COMES FROM AN UNLIKELY SOURCE. The Hebrew slave girl tells her mistress about Elisha, the wonder-working prophet of the Lord. Wife speaks to husband, and husband goes to his king, who writes a letter to his Hebrew enemy counterpart about his beloved commander. "*Please, cure my servant Naaman.*" Interesting that the King missed the part of the Israelite prophet, sending a letter to the King of Israel instead. It is a bizarre situation: a hostile pagan king asks an impossible favor for his commander, putting the King of Israel in a panic! Is this a set-up for Syria to attack Israel again if the King fails to deliver? When the king balks, the prophet of the Lord rushes in. Elisha tells Naaman to come, and when he comes, he brings a huge treasure, along with an entourage of "horses and chariots", a procession of power. Naaman is ready to buy a cure as he is accustomed to bows of honor and unquestioning obedience. If there is a prophet in Israel powerful enough to heal him, Naaman definitely has the means to persuade that prophet. He assumes that what he needs he will get. Such is the way of the world, even today. But the ways of the God of Israel runs counter to this. The humble and unlikely channels of God's power are hinted from the beginning of the story. Naaman learns how he might be healed from a humble source, a young Israelite girl, a powerless slave. To his credit, he values the word of the servant girl passed on through his wife. This is a hopeful sign.

THE TRUE TEST OF NAAMAN'S OPENNESS to the humble and humbling ways of the Lord, however, is the scene in front of Elisha's house. The prophet dishonors the great man at his door. The general expected to be received like a military celebrity. Elisha does not even show himself; instead he sends a messenger. And his message offers further humiliation for Naaman. No special rite of healing will be performed. The prophet will not meet with him at all. "*Go, wash in the Jordan seven times.*" That muddy trickle? Feeling insulted, Naaman cries out, "*Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?*" Naaman turned and stormed away in a rage! Once again, servants save the day. In the beginning, the Hebrew slave girl had spoken about Elisha and his powers. Now, at what seems to be a complete standoff, her fellow servants rescue the situation with common sense. And we see for a second time that Naaman has the grace of being able to hear advice from outside the bubble of his privilege. The story ends with the great general doing what he is told by his lowly servants and he is healed.

HUMILITY IS HARD, but it is simply the truth about us, as it was the truth about Naaman. Yes, Naaman was a man of valor, of substance. But—there is always a "*but*"—he was a leper. Greatness, or pretended greatness, inevitably encounters humility. Naaman's unsought humility was mirrored to him in the person of a young woman, small of stature; he was a general, she was a captive. The not-yet-humbled Naaman rumbled up to Elisha's house expecting to be able to pay his way to healing. Elisha didn't want Naaman merely to be rid of leprosy; he wanted him to be more deeply healed. Faith is the crumpling of pride, best achieved through something as simple, as

obvious, as unimpressive as a bit of water that only Elisha or somebody desperately thirsty would think of as powerful. After all, it just takes a few sprinkles of water at our baptism.

THE DISCIPLES CAME TO JESUS AND ASKED, *“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”* Jesus called a child, whom he put among them, and said: *“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”* Without romanticizing childhood, we may recognize its virtues: vulnerability, an implicit demand for justice, the way children show their treasures, weep in the open, accept grace readily and are easily amazed. The Rev. Byron Bland, former Campus Pastor at Stanford University, tells the story of the occasion when he, as a member of a mediation team, was sent to Northern Ireland to help end the violence and restore peace between the Catholics and Protestants. At a point in the negotiations when it seemed hopeless, one of the Irish Catholic negotiators sighed aloud in an unguarded moment. *I hope my granddaughter isn't ever hurt by the violence.* Overhearing that remark, a Protestant negotiator said in response, *I hope the same for my grandson.* The negotiations took a dramatic turn. It is our children and our grandchildren who will lead us into peace. As the prophet Isaiah wrote centuries ago: *For a child has been born for us...the Prince of Peace.*

I CAME ACROSS THIS STORY written by a mother about her daughter. The mother writes about her daughter's compassion for the homeless. Whenever they are in the car going somewhere, the daughter would be on the lookout for the homeless carrying cardboard signs. She would worry about them not having any money nor any food to eat. The daughter insisted that her mother always carry food in the car just in case. Here is an excerpt from that story:

*“When I see wandering, addicted homeless people, I am seized with a combination of repulsion, anger, and a strong but seemingly pointless desire to help. Which freezes me. But not my daughter. No one has squashed her ardor, her certainty that a guy holding a cardboard sign asking for food must simply be given food. My daughter has been given an unexpected gift. She has tunnel vision of the heart. Maybe that's because she was born with Down Syndrome and is naive for her 13 years. At the end of our conversation that morning, she said to me, ‘Mom, I know what I would have on my cardboard if I was holding a cardboard. It would say, I NEED CD'S.’ I suppress a smile. And then I wonder what I would put on my cardboard sign. I realize there's not a lot of space there. The message is usually simple and clear. And it says the thing you really, really want. Mine would say, PLEASE TAKE MY DAUGHTER'S DISABILITY AWAY. BUT LEAVE HER HEART JUST LIKE IT IS.”*

IN YOUR PEWS, you see a card that is titled: **“Celebrating Children at Calvary”**. The opening paragraph reads, *“The presence of children is a gift to the church and a delight in God! They are a reminder that our congregation is growing and that we are all children of God.”* The Christian faith is a kind of return to childhood, a training in humility. We welcome the reminder that vulnerability and humility, that taking a dip in a minor river on the suggestion of a lowly prophet who wouldn't answer the door is the way to God. For the foolishness of God will always be wiser than all human wisdom.



Calvary Presbyterian Church ~ 2515 Fillmore Street ~ San Francisco, CA 94115 ~ [www.calpres.org](http://www.calpres.org)