

SIMPLICITY IS THE ULTIMATE SOPHISTICATION

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Nadene Grieve-Deslippe on July 4, 2010

Crossroads United Church

2 Kings 5:1-14

Luke 10:1-11,16-20

Many years ago, when our daughter Sarah was of primary age, she overheard me use the reference of having a broken heart in the context of a particular event in the lives of persons of my acquaintance. She came up to me and said, "Mommy, all hearts are made of red glass so that when they are broken they can always be fixed." I know not how she had come to believe that hearts were made of red glass, nor can I recall the context of the story that I was recounting that inspired her to reach out to me in such matter of fact wisdom and compassion. But I remember the conviction with which she spoke and the quality of compassion that was in her voice.

She wanted to assure me, in her then child like way, that this too would pass- that healing and wholeness were inevitable- and that even the most damaged heart could always be restored. Implicit in her childlike wisdom and understanding was the notion, as well, that broken hearts were probably a part of life, but we should take heart that the pain was temporary and wholeness inevitable. Too bad that with maturity often comes cynicism.

We soon forget the healing power that lies in simplicity. Remember when the assurance of God's omnipresence was sufficient to allay our fears of the unknown? Can you recall when imaginations were held captive by the redeeming power of love and the veracity of the happily ever after? When right always triumphed over wrong, and life and love were eternal and the endings always happy? The lame girl learned to walk and the boy unable to talk was gifted with speech? When Lassie came home after overcoming incredible odds, or a handful of soldiers in the trenches were able to stave off the enemy that numbered in the legions, and when the unlikely underling won the fight, the cause, or scored the winning point? Can you remember when in faith, hope and love you believed things like hearts being made of glass and, as a result, impervious to complete

and everlasting damage? The unnamed little servant girl in the Hebrew text was cut from this bolt of cloth, and she is aided and abetted by unnamed servants who likewise dare to believe that healing and wholeness is possible in the simple. Their faith and tenacity is countered in the arrogance of the Aramean military commander, Naaman.

This is the stuff of great story. A little girl-who is a slave ministering to the wife of a conquering hero- having been stolen from the land of her birth and her family as a spoil of war is a heroine. Unjaded by captivity or a life of servitude in a foreign land she seems motivated by love and loyalty, and truly believes that a difference could be made in the life of her master. We wade through the drama of political protocol when the king is sought rather than the prophet Elisha, and when all is sorted out; Naaman presents himself and his imperfect skin at the home of Elisha. Naaman's pride is further exacerbated when the prophet both refuses to come out of his home and give Naaman the respect and pageantry that he expects, but the prescription for healing is likewise distasteful to him.

There was no beseeching of the God of Israel; no secret formula or balm to be applied. The prescription was simply to immerse himself 7 times in the Jordan River and he would be cleansed. Rather than embrace the simplicity Naaman is enraged and storms away in a huff, whereupon unnamed servants who challenge his arrogance approach him. Had he been asked to perform some feat of daring and courage in exchange for a cure he would have gladly colluded. Since the prescription was one of ease, why would the master not embrace it? Whether in desperation or because he could not counter the wisdom of his servants, Naaman does as he has been asked and is restored to wholeness.

Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish essayist once said, "Of all the paths a man could strike into, there is, at any given moment, a best path...a thing which, here and now, it were of all things, wisest for him to do...to find this path, and walk in it, is the one thing needful for him." Sometimes what is needful and what is followed are exclusive. For Naaman, and the path to healing and wholeness, what was needful was to relinquish

his dependence upon pomp and circumstance. The healing of this powerful military strategist and servant of the king is only effected when he succumbs to the ego deflating counsel of servants. The whole process is set in motion by the devotion and faith of a little unnamed girl and is brought to fruition when Naaman sets aside his ego and his passion for the glorious and acknowledges that there may be a place for simplicity in the walk of life. And having discovered the correct path for himself-thanks in large part to the power of God invested in prophets and little girls and wise underlings-Naaman became a follower.

If there is a significant kernel of truth to be gleaned from this narrative that may have an application for all of us, it is that God uses the ordinary and the everyday as avenues for grace. Little witticisms and truths shared by our children in their primary years can touch and inspire us long after these same witticisms would make our now grown children laugh in retrospect. On the first Sunday that I preached here in November 2008 a woman came up to me following the service and said, "You have a great voice. I loved listening to you. I didn't understand a word you said but I loved how you said it." That humbling and affirming response wafts through my brain every time I sit at my desk to craft a theological reflection. It is a reminder of the diversity of experience that gathers weekly in every community and how we must be sensitive to that reality. The light of God radiates in us all, and we must not be dismissive of the very young, or the very old nor anyone in between.

Sometimes God uses the simple faith of children to open our eyes to awe and wonder. Sometimes it is the voice of children in captivity that touches and inspires when we see that they have not become completely jaded by their situation, like the unnamed girl in the Hebrew narrative. And sometimes God uses the proud and haughty to demonstrate what is truly important. For Naaman, power and prestige and military victories and favour with the king did not preclude him the embarrassment of being physically flawed with a skin ailment. All diseases of the skin were labeled leprosy and we can assume that he was probably not a victim of Hansen's disease, because he was allowed to live at home with his wife and servants, and work and travel about without

any restriction. Still, his condition caused him great consternation, else how would a little slave girl have been privy to his heretofore, unsuccessful attempts at a cure?

And sometimes God uses underlings, peers and even those of lofty position to hold up the mirror for us. The servants of Naaman may have been out of line in challenging the rage of their master. Indeed, they may have feared for their safety in offering their two cents worth on the whole scenario. They challenged him to not let his ego stand in the way of possible healing and wholeness. Just because the solution appears to be simple on the surface, do not be dismissive only because you are used to greater challenges. Leonard da Vinci once said, "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication."

In the narrative on the healing of Naaman there is the ultimate sophistication of a little slave girl who is unafraid to let her captors know that she believed in the power of the prophetic to heal. There is the ultimate sophistication of the prophet who recognizes the need in the visiting dignitary to be put in his place. Though he was a man of fame and honour he was still a man. Naaman seems to have lost sight of his common man roots. There ensues the ultimate sophistication in the Aramean commander and warrior who learned that sometimes the voice of wisdom is uttered from the lips of slaves and babes. And further, sometimes sophistication is masked by the veneer of protocol, proper procedures, and notions of self-aggrandizement. And when we peel away the superfluous and the pageantry, then we can get to the authenticity.

Authenticity like kings being born in barns rather than palaces, and rabbi's teaching from the seaside and hillside rather than from the lecture hall, and healing the sick through the sheer power of faith, and carrying one's cross through the crowded streets while being pelted by insults and stones. This is our faith. This is our hope, which sustains us when our fragile hearts have been shattered, and when they have been restored by love. The very foundation of our faith is built on simplicity. Jesus loves me. Thanks be to God. Amen.