

That's Too Easy

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- 2 Kings 5: 1-14 NRSV Naaman, 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 [the kingdom of] Aram. ... Though a mighty warrior, [Naamaan] suffered from leprosy. ² Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³ She said to her mistress, "If only my lord [your husband] were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." ⁴ So Naaman went in and told his lord [the king] just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. ⁵ And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter [of introduction]." [Naamaan] went, taking with him [about 750 lbs.] of silver, [150 lbs.] of gold, and ten sets of garments....
⁹ So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. ¹⁰ Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." ¹¹ But 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! ¹² Are 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. ¹³ But 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'?" ¹⁴ So [Naamaan] went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of [the prophet Elisha] the man of God; [Naamaan's] flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.
- Romans 3:21-24 Good News Translation ²¹ But now God's way of putting people right with himself has been revealed.... ²² God puts people right through their faith in Jesus Christ. God does this to all who believe in Christ, because there is no difference at all: ²³ everyone has sinned and is far away from God's saving presence. ²⁴ But by the free gift of God's grace all are put right with him through Christ Jesus, who sets them free.

How are we "put right" with God? How does God do it?

Most of us are not under spiritual delusions. We know we're not perfect. We know we don't always treat others as we would like to be treated. We forget to express appreciation. We allow greed to nudge us in ways that most people probably don't notice, but we know. We expect preferential consideration because we're sure we deserve it. We're quick to spend on ourselves, not so quick to share for the needs of others. We put gratitude to God on a shelf, forgetting that everything – even the very lives we live – everything is a gift that God graciously, unconditionally bestows on us.

We know we're not perfect. So how can we face God? How can we approach God when we feel that we don't deserve God's welcome? What must we have to do to get in God's good graces again?

We may figure that being “put right” with God must require a lot from us. Spiritual clarity. Impressive generosity. Unquestionable behavior. Pure thoughts. Exceptional commitment. Perfect self-control.

Isn't that the way you earn your way in society? To get where we want to go we have to excel. We have to demonstrate mastery. Our reputation has to be clean (or it has to have been cleaned up). It helps to know someone who knows someone. And often, money talks: it tells others that you're worth accepting. Yes, in order to be accepted in the business world, in academia, in society, we expect that there are hoops we must jump through to demonstrate our worthiness, our readiness.

But our God doesn't work that way. The God who imagined the world into existence and brought us into being by speaking a spark of life into earthly elements – our infinite, omnipotent, omniscient and merciful God does not hold us at arm's length with a list of prerequisites to be satisfied before God will embrace us in love.

God became incarnate, adopting human flesh to be present to us in our world in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus made the invisible visible. Jesus embodied the Heavenly Father's loving acceptance. The Gospel of John presents Jesus himself saying, “...Believe in God and believe also in me.”¹ Pretty straight-forward. Uncomplicated. In Jesus Christ God invites us to be “put right” regardless of how we think or act.

Still, we find it hard. We're used to offers like that being complicated. Difficult. Costly. Testing our resolve and our endurance.

In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul described the shocking truth about how God offers to restore people's relationship, how God “puts people right.” In Romans 3:22 Paul asserts, “God puts people right through their faith in Jesus Christ. God does this to all who believe in Christ...”² Did you hear the simple requirement? Believe in Jesus the Son of God. Believe. Or you might say “trust.” Or “accept.” “Embrace.” “Submit.”

We're not used to opportunities being presented to us so clearly, so simply. We're not used to that. It might even make us suspicious: “That's all? Believe? Put my faith in Jesus? I can't believe that's all there is to it.”

Actually, there's a story in the Old Testament that illustrates that being put right with God is, well, not complicated. Simpler than imagined.

From 2 Kings Chapter 5 we heard the story of a Syrian army commander called Namaan. He'd had quite a successful career in service to his king, even defeating the Israelites on one occasion. He was well regarded by his king and his troops. But he did have one flaw: the Bible says that Namaan suffered from leprosy. In those days the term

¹ John 14:1b Good News Translation

² Romans 3:22 Good News Translation

leprosy referred to any number of skin ailments including boils, psoriasis, ringworm, rosacea, as well as Hansen's Disease which is what leprosy is called today. Anyway, whatever specific ailment he had, leprosy was a hindrance for Namaan.

As it happened, Namaan's wife had a servant, a young Israelite girl who had been captured in a battle some years before. The servant told her mistress, "If only your husband could see the prophet in Israel's land of Samaria – he could cure your husband's disease." The wife told Namaan; he told his king; the king told Namaan to go, even providing him with papers and treasures to assure his safe passage.

Eventually Namaan and his entourage arrived at the home of the Israelite prophet Elisha. Before Namaan could even announce his purpose for visiting, Elisha sent a messenger out to greet the visiting general. The messenger spoke these instructions: "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean."

Namaan was caught off-guard. Then he became incensed. He sputtered, "How dare that prophet not even come out himself to greet a visiting dignitary of my importance! Sending a messenger to greet a general! And telling me to wash in the Jordan River? That's it!?! He didn't even wave his hand over my blemished skin and invoke his god. Back in Syria we have rivers far better than the measly Jordan; I could have washed my skin back home." Furious, Namaan began to ride away.

But one of his servants caught up to him. "If it please your Lordship, if the prophet had directed you to do something difficult, don't you think you would have done it? So, why not do what he said, even if it was something as simple as, 'Wash yourself in the Jordan seven times and you'll be cleansed.'"

Well, Namaan did just that. Seven times he immersed himself in the Jordan River, and after the seventh time, "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean."³

One reason that story is a miracle is that it involved such a simple, ordinary action.

You might have any number of reasons – excuses, maybe – why you haven't fully put your trust in God. Something has kept you from fully embracing God's simple offer of acceptance and love, forgiveness and mercy, guidance and comfort.

You may say, "I don't have time to do everything I'd need to do." Yet what is there to do. Accept God's gracious invitation. Decide to believe....

³ 2 Kings 5:14b New Revised Standard Version

You may say, "My life right now is too messed up for me to be trying to serve God." You know what? God chose many messed up people to work God's will in the world: God employed Jonah to proclaim God's will despite Jonah repeatedly criticizing God's plan; God used Jacob, a scheming son who deceived his own father in order to cheat his brother; God entrusted a prostitute named Rahab with protecting some Israelites behind enemy lines; God used Simon Peter despite Peter's betrayal of Jesus not once or twice but three times. God can use your life even with all its messes and misses.

You may say, "I can't believe in God until I read the whole Bible." You know, even Christ's disciples hadn't read the whole Bible, but they believed in God and God welcomed their faith.

Maybe your hesitation is, "I'm not sure I know how to pray correctly." Can you talk with a friend? And can you listen to that friend? You have what it takes. To pray to God you don't need special words or fancy language. Say what's on your mind, what's on your heart. Listen for the stirrings within. God believes in you and invites you to believe, too.

Or maybe you wonder, "Some people I see on TV who claim that they are Christians are saying and doing stuff that I just can't accept. It certainly doesn't seem to fall in the category of 'What would Jesus do'." I agree with you. I think that in addition to being guided by the Golden Rule of "do to others as you would have them do to you," we who follow Jesus should gauge our actions by the story he told in Matthew Chapter 25 where he said, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."⁴

Whatever reason you may have convinced yourself of is no reason that you can't put your trust in the God we know through the words and example of Jesus the Son. As we heard from Romans Chapter 3, "God puts people right through their faith in Jesus Christ. God does this to all who believe in Christ..."⁵ Friends, I invite you simply to believe. Accept Jesus to be in your life. Submit to his example. Embrace his spirit. Trust his presence. Believe. Amen.

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⁴ Matthew 25:40 New International Version

⁵ Romans 3:22 Good News Translation