

It's that simple

2 Kings 5:1-14

February 12, 2012

Who loves you?

Who can you count among those who genuinely love you? Those who want nothing less than the best for you? Those who invest themselves by what they say and what they do in your well-being? Those who are attentive to you, who take the time and make the effort to know you, to know what you really need and what you really want? Those who know your rough edges -- your vulnerabilities and your weaknesses and your defects of character -- but are ready both to forgive them and to help you work to change them? Those who want you to live? Those who want you to be well? Those who want you to do well?

Who loves you ... whether you expect it or not, whether you deserve it or not?

Who loved Naaman?

Actually, a surprising number of people. I say surprising because I doubt Naaman was a terribly lovable man. He was the commander of the army of Syria, a successful commander, a great soldier. What do you suppose it would take to be a successful commander, a great soldier, in an age of close combat, hand-to-hand and face-to-face? Strength? Daring? An iron will and an iron fist? Ruthlessness? Probably. Pity? Unlikely.

He seems a man full of himself and his own importance, a haughty man, a man used to being feared and obeyed, maybe even a cruel man. So it is surprising that more than a few people loved Naaman, more than you might expect, more than he probably deserved. But do any of us deserve to be loved? Isn't love always a gift?

Who loved Naaman?

His boss, the king of Syria, did. Actually, the biblical record says the king respected and esteemed him, because of his military successes. Is respect and esteem the same as love? Isn't the king's admiration rather self-serving? Surely he loved Naaman because Naaman served his own ambitions.

But the king did send Naaman to Israel in search of a cure. Naaman had a terrible skin disease -- a visible blemish, a conspicuous insult to his honor -- and the king did send him to Samaria armed with an official letter of reference. And maybe that is love.

Naaman's wife loved him. She was the one who told him of the prophet in Samaria who could cure him of his disease. She heard it from one of her servants, a little girl, a little Hebrew girl. The girl told her and she told Naaman and Naaman told the king and the king set him on his way. She loved her husband. She wanted him to be well. She wanted the best for him.

But so did that little servant girl. She loved him! She wanted him to live. She wanted him to be well, so she told her mistress about the prophet in Israel. This is what love is!

But she was a victim, a war prize carried off by some of Naaman's soldiers. She was his victim, his slave, living and serving in his household, uprooted from her own home, wrenched from her own family. So why did she love him? Why, indeed? But she did. She just did. She wanted him to live. She wanted him to be well, so she told her mistress about the prophet in her homeland.

She told her mistress, and her mistress told her husband, and her husband told the king, and the king set Naaman on his way. Naaman set out for Samaria with all the accoutrements of a royal delegation. He went furnished with the royal letter of introduction, with a fortune in silver and gold and fine clothing, with horses and chariots and servants. He went with the blessings of his king to seek the blessings and favor of the king of Israel.

But once the king of Israel read the letter, he was beside himself. "You want me to do what? Cure your general? Who do you think I am -- God?" He was convinced the king of Syria was trying to pick a fight.

The king of Israel didn't love Naaman! He had no reason to love him, but fear blinded him anyway to any modicum of compassion he might have had. He saw a threat, not a man in need.

But the prophet, Elisha, heard of the visit and told the king to chill out and to send him his way, so Naaman went and arrived at Elisha's doorstep. That must have been quite a scene! Elisha's house was no royal palace. Can you imagine it: the horses, the chariots, the servants, the chests of silver and gold, the soldier of obviously great importance, parked in front of a prophet's hovel?

And, to top it off, Elisha didn't even come out of the house to greet his illustrious guest! He sent out a servant instead. Elisha sent out a servant to tell Naaman to go down to the Jordan River and wash himself and he would be cured.

Naaman was affronted and furious. He expected an audience worthy of his station. He expected this prophet whom he had come so far to see and whom he intended to reward so well to give him his focused attention and the full benefit of his reputed healing skills. But all the prophet did was send a messenger to tell him to go and wash in the Jordan, to go and wash in that stinking little river in this stinking little land of his stinking little enemy!

Naaman wouldn't think of it. He would not stoop so low. Tell me, did Naaman love Naaman? Or did pride blind him to love, just as fear had blinded the Israelite king?

That might have been the end of it, were it not for Naaman's servants. "Sir," they said, "if the prophet had told you to do something difficult, you would have done it. Now why can't you just wash yourself, as he said, and be cured?"

They wanted him to be cured. They wanted him to be well. They wanted what was best for him so they spoke up. They loved him! Why should they love him? What did they owe him that he did not merely take for himself? Why should they care? Why should they love him?

But they did. They didn't just whisper among themselves about their pig-headed master as they might have done. They spoke to him, with wisdom and common sense and compassion.

And Naaman listened. Naaman listened to them, went down to the Jordan, washed himself seven times, and was cured. It was that simple.

Who saved Naaman? Not kings or prophets, not wealth or power or prestige or a letter from a king. Naaman was saved by a little girl, his own servants, and a humble river.

Who saved Naaman? The Lord did! The Lord cured his disease. The Lord called to him through the love of the little servant girl. The Lord counseled him through the love of his servants. And the Lord washed him clean in the River Jordan.

The Lord loved Naaman! Why? Why would the Lord love the enemy of his own people and give him the best of his gifts? Why, indeed? That's just who the Lord is. It's that simple.

Who loves you?

Who can you count among those who genuinely love you? Who want nothing less than the best for you? Who invest themselves by what they do in your well-being? Who want you to live, to be well, to do well? Whether you expect it or not? Whether you deserve it or not?

Who loves you?

The Lord does. The Lord loves you. It's that simple.

The Lord gave Naaman the best of his gifts, and the Lord will do the same for you. Don't let fear blind you. Don't let pride blind you. Don't let anger blind you. Don't let shame blind you. Don't make it more complicated than it needs to be.

The Lord loves you. It's that simple.