

“Straight talk with God”

We can tell God what's in our hearts

February 15, 2009

Text: 1 Kings 5:1-14, Mark 1:40-45

I.

Along with compassion, humility is one of the core values of our Christian faith. In fact, it's one of the defining values of all the religions of the earth. However, as we think about humility, it's an elusive quality, isn't it?

It's not something we can claim for ourselves. If we do, immediately, we lose it. Of course, truly humble people don't have to claim it; they live it; and that's the key.

Humble people realize—right away—that the world doesn't revolve around them. They have things in perspective. They see the BIG PICTURE ... how we're all in this life together and how we all have our role, our purpose. How, *there but for the grace of God go any one of us*.

Abraham Lincoln, whose 200th birthday we observed this past Thursday, was perhaps our greatest president. *Honest Abe*, he was called. But he was also, *humble Abe*. In his Second Inaugural Address, with the Civil War winding down, Lincoln noted how both sides—the North and the South ...

...read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes God's favor against the other. It may seem strange, he went on, that any men should dare to ask a just God's favor in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we not be judged.

Lincoln's purpose was never the destruction of the South; it was the preservation of the Union. At the conclusion of the war, he advocated the most gracious amnesty ...

With malice toward none, he said (again, in this same Inaugural), with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wound ... to do all which may achieve a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

Wow! What sensitive and enlightened leadership ... with the BIG PICTURE in mind ... binding up the nation's wounds ... no sound or murmur of judgment or punishment for the vanquished.

Humility is indeed a hallowed virtue.

II.

In our story of Naaman, the Aramean general, at the outset, Naaman lacks the humility of which we've been speaking. After all, he's a powerful military man, a man of enormous might and influence. He's used to giving orders and to getting his way.

However, as you heard in the reading shared earlier, there's much more to the story of Naaman. For, Naaman, it turns out, has leprosy, the dreaded skin disease that brings every man to his knees.

It's notable, isn't it, how disease and affliction apparently have no eyes and make no distinctions. In any moment of time, they can happen to anybody.

Overnight, almost, any of us can be brought to our knees and rendered irretrievably vulnerable. To those of us who staunchly declare to the world: *It will never happen to me!* Get real! For the truth is, it can and it does.

Upon learning of his leprosy, Naaman is no doubt utterly shocked. He's utterly unprepared, too, as the story suggests. In short order, he exhausts all the possibilities to be cured. Nothing has worked. He's at his wits end. What's he to do? For him, this is unfamiliar territory.

III.

However, we're getting a little ahead of ourselves in Naaman's story. For although he's clearly in a vulnerable state, he hasn't totally admitted it to himself. To a considerable extent, he still thinks he's in control and calling the shots.

When his wife tells him what the young Israelite girl (who'd been captured in one of Naaman's military raids and who, now, works as her servant) says about there being a prophet in Israel that can cure him, he's eager to check out the possibility.

Soon, the details are worked out and Naaman travels to Israel, pulling up in front of the prophet Elisha's house with his horses and chariots and a load of extravagant gifts. He's expecting some sort of magical moment when healing comes with great fanfare and he's—on the spot—cured of his leprosy.

But the prophet Elisha doesn't even come out of his house to greet him. Instead, he sends a messenger out to him, saying,

*Go, wash in the Jordan seven times,
and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.*

Naaman's immediate reaction: *You mean, that's it? That's all there is?* He thought that at least the prophet would come out to him and lay his hands on him and call on the name

of his God ... something. Not just these simple words from a messenger. And so, predictably, Naaman is insulted; and he becomes angry and enraged.

But soon his servants calm him down and eventually persuade him to do as the prophet has suggested. And Naaman goes down and immerses himself seven times in the Jordan and, immediately, he's cured and his flesh is restored like the flesh of a young boy.

IV.

It's in the actual healing itself that Naaman—at last—is truly humbled ... and truly healed as well, it turns out. Until then, there was something in Naaman that was holding him back. Pride, perhaps, or habit ... or not truly believing that healing was possible ... whatever it was.

Somehow, Elisha seemed to grasp this; and, no doubt, that's why he didn't come out.

- He didn't want to just heal Naaman of his leprosy;
- he wanted to heal him in the deepest possible sense—in depths of his soul and spirit.

As a military man of might and stature, he'd never learned that it was okay to be human and vulnerable ... and to be open about his needs. He'd never learned that he could talk to God. That he could tell God his anxieties and fears. That he didn't have to hide behind his status as a powerful general.

Steeped all his life in the tradition of military culture, he'd always been in control. Faith to him had always been a means to an end. As long as he kept winning battles, he didn't mind giving God the credit.

But all of his life, it had been all about him. He'd never known true humility.

V.

Always, faith calls us to realities and experiences beyond ourselves. To be embraced by the holy ... when the holy comes close, we gain the profound sense that it's not about us and it doesn't have to make sense. It's about God ... and our ways are not God's ways.

Faith calls us to an experience of utter dependence and vulnerability ... to the point where we openly confess, *I need something beyond myself. A power, a presence, something to bridge the distance and move me beyond isolation. I need my family and friends. I need love; I need God.* For many people, that's a life-changing confession.

Straight talk with God.

The words of the hymn come ushering forth ...

*I need you every hour, O God of grace;
The peace your voice affords I now embrace.*

*I need you every hour, in faith or fear;
Temptations lose their power when you are near.*

*I need you every hour; teach me your will,
And your rich promises in me fulfill.*

*I need you, how I need you! Every hour I need you;
O bless me now, my Savior; I come to you.*

These words of the hymn are words of confession. They're also *straight talk ... straight talk with God*. We need to be able to tell God what's in our heart.

The words are a reminder of the depths to which faith calls us ... beyond the surface ... beyond the routine or mundane. We're called to a total transformation of the spirit—like Naaman, after he'd finally surrendered and thrown himself in the healing waters seven times.

VI.

More than leprosy, what Naaman really suffered from was inflated pride and ego and a sense of self-importance. While his leprosy—for sure—taught him more humility than he wanted know.

What really humbled him was the transformational power of God that came over him in the waters of the river Jordan. When he experienced that power, the power of the holy, he was a changed man.

Small wonder when, later—before he returned home—he asked if he could take two mule loads of earth back with him so he would never be too far from the holy land that had (now) redirected his life.

The Bible teaches us—over and again—that we all need to be changed. Not that we're necessarily deficient or lacking, but because God is always calling us to more. More faith ... more belief ... more love ... more compassion and more forgiveness.

Why? Because in these qualities, God is revealed and all of life is made more holy and more filled with grace.

The leper in our reading from Mark 1 learned this first hand. Leprosy had taken over his life. And then he met Jesus and he didn't hold back. Overcome with misery, he told Jesus what was in his heart:

If you choose, he said, you can make me clean.

And of course, Jesus chooses and he's made clean.

VII.

Eventually, each in his own way, both the man in Mark 1 and Naaman, the Aramean general, come to the foot of the holy and are healed.

We, too, can come; and we can tell God whatever is troubling us in mind, body and spirit.

We all have our stuff ... our worries ... anxieties ... our fears. For many of us, these are the toughest days of our lifetime. There are so many unknowns.

For how much longer will we be able to make ends meet? What are we going to do if our money runs out? And what about our health insurance? For many in our communities and perhaps some of us, these are very real fears.

With all of this in mind, we need to be able to tell God what's in our hearts. We need to be able to talk straight with God.

Whatever our deepest troubles and our most enduring darkness, share it with God. Turn it over. Don't keep it to yourself, allowing it to fester and boil in your heart and spirit. Sometimes our pride becomes a barrier between us and the spiritual healing and comfort we yearn for.

In closing, let the words of the **Psalmist** wash over us ...

*O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you;
My flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.*

*So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.
Because your steadfast love is better than life itself, my lips will praise you.
So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name.*

With all that we are dealing with in these uncertain times, we can talk to God, friends.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*
6701 Miami Lakeway South
Miami Lakes, FL 33014
On the web at www.mlcchurch.com

