

Servanthood
The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, July 7, 2019
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the name of God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

A few years ago, I was asked to lead a prayer for a Latino basketball league that played in a church gymnasium on Sunday evenings. I wanted to impress this group, so I grabbed a Spanish prayer book and decided to offer the Lord's Prayer in Spanish. At a break in the game, the referees invited me to the center of the court. I began praying the Padre Nuestro, which is the "Our Father" in Spanish, and I completely butchered it. I felt humiliated that I was speaking Spanish so poorly. As I finally and mercifully made it to the end of the prayer, do you know what the players and spectators did? They all stood up and applauded. Sometimes we can let our own pride or ego or our notion that we have to show ourselves to be completely competent get in the way of simply connecting with God and the people around us.

We have an example of this in the story of Naaman in our Old Testament lesson from Second Kings today. Naaman was an Aramean general who was a mighty warrior. But he also suffered from leprosy.

On one of their many raids, Naaman's army captured a young girl from Israel. She now served Naaman's wife, functioning as a maid. Imagine how this young girl must have felt. She would probably have felt fear and resentment toward these foreigners who have taken her against her will, these people who have separated her from her family and her homeland. But she would also remember the values she was taught by her family and her elders. She would remember that she was taught to serve God at all times and in all places.

I imagine her helping Naaman's wife get dressed, and while she may resent that she has to do this, she notices a tear on the wife's cheek. And her impulse to serve God moves inside the young girl. In this moment, she doesn't see the wife as an imperial conqueror. Instead, through this moment and many other moments, she begins to see the wife as a real human being, a fellow traveler in the human journey.

She learns that the wife is in tears because her husband has leprosy. The young servant girl tells her of the prophet of God in her homeland. If only Naaman were with him, he could be healed. After the wife tells Naaman what the young girl told her about the prophet, Naaman goes to Israel to see the prophet Elisha.

Now Naaman has already scripted out his healing in his mind. He, the great general, will arrive at Elisha's house with his great entourage of soldiers, horses, chariots, and gifts. Then Elisha will come out to him – and will stand and call upon the name of the Lord his God. Then the great prophet will approach the great general and will wave his hand over the spot, and then,

suddenly, the leprosy will be healed. In essence, Naaman wanted to buy his own healing. He wanted it to happen out of his own competence in being recognized as a great general.

But notice what happens. The prophet Elisha does not even come out of his house. Instead, just as the young servant girl played a pivotal role in the start of this healing story, another servant, a messenger of Elisha, is sent out to tell Naaman what he needs to do to be healed. Basically, he tells Naaman to go dunk his head in the Jordan River 7 times and call me in the morning.

Naaman is furious. This means of healing is not going anything like his script. First of all, this supposed great prophet Elisha did not even come out to see him.

Now, I don't believe Elisha was being rude to Naaman. Instead, he realized that Naaman needed to be cured of a lot more than just leprosy. Naaman also needed to be healed from his arrogant pride. By sending his servant, Elisha was reminding Naaman that the two of them were also servants, not lead actors, in this story. The main work of healing was not being done by Elisha's activity nor by Naaman's competence and gifts.

Instead this healing was due to the work of God, working through servants - even a young servant girl to Naaman's wife, even a servant-messenger of Elisha. Elisha was also teaching Naaman that healing does not have to take place through elaborate ceremony and ritual. Instead, God's healing often comes even and especially in the midst of the imperfection and messiness of our lives. It does not always come on our terms or in ways that we expect. Naaman wonders why he could not be healed in one of the pristine rivers of his homeland, instead of the muddy Jordan River of Israel.

Guess who convinces him to be healed – his own servants. They offer him some God-given reason and common sense. They remind Naaman that he would have done anything far more difficult to be healed. Why not humble yourself, go bathe in the Jordan, and be healed?

They convince him. They teach him the gift they had learned while working for him - the gift of servanthood, which is humility. These servants, like the young girl servant and Elisha's messenger, teach us that healing happens when we humble ourselves and simply connect to God and those around us in simple, even messy, servanthood.

The Latino basketball players and spectators taught me that too. It did not matter whether or not I said the Lord's Prayer in perfect Spanish. What mattered was that someone took the time to show up and pray with them, no matter how imperfect or messy. What mattered was that we connected to each other on the very basic level of our shared humanity and humility as fellow servants before Almighty God. What matters now is that we simply care for one another, as God always cares for us.

Amen.