

Baptism (2 Kings 5:1-14, Mark 1:4-11)

Keith Miller was in his office, when a young man came in looking for someone to talk to. He told Keith he had “a problem in a close relationship in his life which reflected some attitudes he definitely considered to be un-Christian. He was a very sensitive person, and his rejection of himself for having those feelings was intense.” Keith writes, “After his confession, I looked at him for a long minute; he seemed so lonely with his problem--and I was horrified to realize that I had the same difficulty that very morning. I was tempted to pray for him and keep still about my problem. Actually I just wanted to get away. But since we were in my office, I couldn't. I found myself sort of sheepishly telling the man in his misery that I had experienced the same kind of jealousy and hostile resentment that same day.

“I thought he would walk out of my office in disgust. But instead, he just looked at me in disbelief and said, ‘Are you serious?’ Then I really wished I hadn't told him. But when I nodded my head, he began to weep and said, ‘Oh, thank you. If you've got this problem and are able to keep going as a committed Christian, maybe I can. I have been so alone.’ I remember being surprised at his reaction and realizing that he hadn't primarily wanted an ‘answer man.’ He wanted someone to be with him in his problem. And my identification with him as a ‘sinner’ was a kind of ‘answer’ from his perspective.” (The Passionate People, Word Books, p. 68) Keith Miller did not want to admit or recognize his own weakness and sin. And yet it was by being honest and vulnerable that he was able to bring God's grace to someone who needed it. He was both healer and healed.

It's not easy to do what Keith Miller did. Not easy to admit sin in our own lives. Not easy to let go of pride. After all, who wants to admit weakness or need? Naaman sure didn't. He was a powerful and successful man, the Norman Schwartzkoff of his day, commander of the Syrian army. He turned the it into a mean, killing machine. It won battle after battle. Of course, he was compensated well—BMW, big house, servant girl, plenty of money in the bank, respect wherever he went. But Naaman was sick. When he touched his skin, it was not smooth and pink, but white and flaky, with boils and sores. He hid it under his clothing, so no one would see. But it bothered him. He wanted a cure. Surely that is not too much to expect for a man of his stature. A man of his stature ought to be able to get a cure the way he got everything else. So he whips out 30,000 shekels of silver and offers it to the King of Israel, because he had heard a rumor that there was a cure in Israel. The king thought Naaman was just asking him to do something impossible, so that when he failed, he could rain down death and destruction on Israel, and so he tears his clothes. The servant girl of Naaman's wife knew it was the Prophet Elisha, not the king who could help. But Naaman hadn't listened. Elisha hears about the kings problem and sends for Naaman to come and be healed.

Naaman goes out to meet this man. He drives out there--big, long, shiny stretch limousine. His chauffeur drives him up. A man of Naaman's stature

demands respect. The driver announces his arrival. Does Elisha come out? No. Instead he sends out a servant boy to deliver a message. "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." Naaman is insulted. A servant boy? Where is the prophet? Doesn't he know who is calling? I get better service at McDonalds. I get him more respect at Wal-Mart. The prophet doesn't even show his face. Sends some third rate clerk. "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." Is he crazy?! There are better rivers running through my back yard than this muddy ditch they call the Jordan River. It's like someone giving you a Fruit of the Loom t-shirt and asking you to wear it to the prom instead of tux. He's had it. He storms out, clutching his disease to his breast. Naaman's ready to throw away his only chance for a new start. But his servant boy says, "Naaman, if you been asked to do some macho thing like climb a mountain or build this guy and mansion, it would have been no problem. All he asks you to do is wash seven time? Is that so hard?"

Religious people, especially, have a hard time with sin. It is hard to admit sin in our own lives. It is hard to be willing to open hearts to people who are hurting or sinful. Very difficult. This is why the baptism of Jesus was so difficult for the early church to understand. Baptism was like a confession of sin. You came to be baptized, so that your sins could be forgiven. Mark tells us that John the Baptist came preaching a baptism of repentance and forgiveness. So what was Jesus doing there? He doesn't have anything to repent of. He doesn't need forgiveness. You expect to see the local church people at the confessional, and God knows drug dealers and sex offenders need to go there. But what would Jesus be doing there? Think how shocked you would be if you saw Jesus going down the isle at a Billy Graham Crusade! What sin has he got to turn away from? Matthew struggles with the issue. In his gospel we read how John the Baptist is shocked by the very idea. "Lord, I need to be baptized by you, not you by me." And gives the answer—it is to "fulfill all righteousness." When you read Luke's account of Jesus' baptism, you almost get the feeling that the writer is embarrassed to even mention the incident. He describes it in five words, "when Jesus also had been baptized". He doesn't mention that Jesus requested baptism, or that John had trouble with the idea, just, "Jesus also had been baptized." It is almost as if he was ashamed that his Lord and leader had gone to be baptized, in the muddy waters of the Jordan River, like some common sinner at a gospel crusade.

Jesus never gives it a second thought. John says, "Jesus, don't do it." But Jesus says, "Hold your peace," and identifying with us, throwing away any hint that he was respectable or proud, he lays down his body in the muddy waters of the Jordan river (just as later on, he would lay down his body on a wooden cross, the symbol of complete and utter defeat and failure) to walk in the middle of humanity with sinners like us. Paul writes, "For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Christ could have run the other way. The Pharisees did--No healing on the Sabbath, even if it means someone dies; don't touch lepers; stay away from

him, he's a tax collector; how can you let that woman wipe your feet with her hair? Don't you know she's a prostitute. He could have run . . . and no one would have been healed; no joy of seeing people healed and transformed. He could have run from the cross. His disciples wanted him to run. When he told them he needed to die, Peter said, "Lord this must never happen to you!" He could have run . . . and no one would have know God's forgiveness in their lives. It might have been a word, distant, promised, but it would never have been real. Jesus he didn't run, and so he is a place of strength, not just one more burden for people to bear. John said, "Don't do it, Lord," but Jesus didn't flinch from slipping his body down into the muddy waters of the Jordan river. Thank God!

Where is it that healing comes? It doesn't come through success and achievement. It comes from the loving grace of God. Naaman thought you would find it where power and status live. He could hardly believe that it could be found in Israel, but if, as rumor had it, it could be found in that hillbilly country, surely the King of Israel would be the one to ask. His wife's servant girl, a girl captured on an army raid and made into a conquest of war knew more about where healing was to be found than the King of Israel. It was the Prophet Elijah who could bring it. And where does the prophet direct Naaman? To the palace? No! To the Pentagon or the White house? No! To the muddy waters of the Jordan River.

In Naaman, we see a picture of ourselves. Tempted to keep shame and weakness at arm's length, we are quick to deny our own need. We are not, after all adulterers, like David. We don't hire our army commanders as hit men to rub out the husband of the woman we want to keep all for ourselves. We are not call girls, like Rahab, or hustling cheats, like Zacheus. Our sin is more likely to be in our failure to help others, in our misuse of God's gifts, in secretly delighting in our hearts when someone who has done us wrong gets fails or falters, in gossip, in envy, in heartlessness, or faithlessness, or inattentiveness to what is most important in life. The list goes on and on. We're not black sheep like those famous sinners, but if we look closely, we will find that, just like Naaman, we have plenty of grey areas in our souls.

And so, we face a choice, day by day. We can choose pride or healing. We can choose pride, or forgiveness. We can have our pride, or experience the joy of God's presence.

Naaman wanted to deal with his sickness in the same way that he dealt with everything else in his life: through strength. Through pride, through self-control and power he thought he could overcome sickness. He thought he could buy a cure. He wanted to command it out of his sight, like he commanded his troops and they obeyed. Wonder of wonders, a miserable captive now serving as his wife's servant knew more about how sickness could be cured than this great man. Naaman was ready to throw it all away because of his wounded pride, until his own servant taught him something that he could not see. When it comes to our relationship with God, our spiritual health, our forgiveness, our purpose, our well being, our direction in life, we can't earn it; we can't wear it around our neck like an emblem of spiritual excellence won in a marathon prayer run. We can't find healing by being the rabbit that always crosses the finish line

ahead of the crowd and leaves the turtle in the dust. Naaman learned that it is when we are willing to shed the shell of pride, and come in our slow need to the muddy waters of the Jordan River, to God's grace in Christ, then our skin becomes as firm as a child's and what was diseased is made whole.

Naaman is a picture of ourselves. We need healing. Like Naaman, we want to do more than put bandages on the symptoms. We want to be made whole again. Like Naaman, whether we know it or not, we need to be in a place where we can praise and receive God's grace rather than in a place where we must constantly pretend to be people that we aren't. The Bible tells us, "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." This Sunday is the Sunday we celebrate the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ. That baptism meant many things to him. To us it means that God has provided a place of healing and forgiveness. Christ Jesus laid himself down in those muddy waters to identify with us, in our weakness, in our shame and in hope. There, like Naaman, we find healing and joy.