



# First United Church of Oak Park

## Interdependence Day

2 Kings 5:1-14

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2 Kings 5:1-14, Common English Bible (CEB)

Naaman is healed

<sup>1</sup>Naaman, a general for the king of Aram, was a great man and highly regarded by his master, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. This man was a mighty warrior, but he had a skin disease.

<sup>2</sup> Now Aramean raiding parties had gone out and captured a young girl from the land of Israel. She served Naaman's wife. <sup>3</sup> She said to her mistress, "I wish that my master could come before the prophet who lives in Samaria. He would cure him of his skin disease." <sup>4</sup> So Naaman went and told his master what the young girl from the land of Israel had said.

<sup>5</sup> Then Aram's king said, "Go ahead. I will send a letter to Israel's king." So Naaman left. He took along ten kikkars of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing. <sup>6</sup> He brought the letter to Israel's king. It read, "Along with this letter I'm sending you my servant Naaman so you can cure him of his skin disease."

<sup>7</sup> When the king of Israel read the letter, he ripped his clothes. He said, "What? Am I God to hand out death and life? But this king writes me, asking me to cure someone of his skin disease! You must realize that he wants to start a fight with me."

<sup>8</sup> When Elisha the man of God heard that Israel's king had ripped his clothes, he sent word to the king: "Why did you rip your clothes? Let the man come to me. Then he'll know that there's a prophet in Israel."

<sup>9</sup> Naaman arrived with his horses and chariots. He stopped at the door of Elisha's house. <sup>10</sup> Elisha sent out a messenger who said, "Go and wash seven times in the Jordan River. Then your skin will be restored and become clean."

<sup>11</sup> But Naaman went away in anger. He said, "I thought for sure that he'd come out, stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the bad spot, and cure the skin disease. <sup>12</sup> Aren't the rivers in Damascus, the Abana and the Pharpar, better than all Israel's waters? Couldn't I wash in them and get clean?" So he turned away and proceeded to leave in anger.

<sup>13</sup> Naaman's servants came up to him and spoke to him: "Our father, if the prophet had told you to do something difficult, wouldn't you have done it? All he said to you was, 'Wash and become clean.'" <sup>14</sup> So Naaman went down and bathed in the Jordan seven times, just as the man of God had said. His skin was restored like that of a young boy, and he became clean.

When we read this scripture in staff meeting, the first thing that was said was, "What's this about the king of Israel tearing his clothes?" That is an excellent question. Why is he freaking out? Ripping your clothes was a typical sign of mourning and anguish in the ancient world. Still, why did a letter saying someone wanted to be healed of leprosy cause the king all this anguish? First, he assumed because the Arameans had already

attacked them, that this was a trick from the enemy, asking the king to do something he could not do. Why did it never dawn on him that he had a prophet who could handle this task? Why did his trust in God crumble in the face of his enemy? Why did he think he, as a king, would be held responsible for a healing?

A friend of mine was on a plane last week. As the plane was about to take off, a woman asked for a blanket. The flight attendants apologized that they did not have any blankets. The woman quickly escalated. She was angry. She demanded the flight attendants bring her a blanket. She accused the flight attendants of lying and yelled at them for what she perceived to be mistreatment. Not having had any luck deescalating the situation, the flight attendants went up to the captain who stopped short of taking off with the thought that this woman would have to be escorted off the plane. As the woman became increasingly rude, a little ten-year-old girl turned to her mom and said, "I have a blanket in my carry on. Will you give it to her?" The mom pulled out one of those fleece no sew blankets in bright colors that you can buy kits for children to make themselves at the craft store. She gave it to the woman and the plane was able to take off. When the plane landed, my friend found the little girl and her mom to say thank you. She told the little girl, "To be able to be so kind when another person isn't being very nice means that you are working so hard at being a caring person. That was one of the coolest things I've ever seen anyone do." The mom teared up and hugged my friend before they went on to collect their bags.

I talked with my friend about how as children, seeing an adult behaving badly, we would have been fearful, but this ten-year-old and her mom were so calm. There were other players in the story we might have expected to find a solution. The flight attendants who seemed to be the figures of authority and seemed that they should have been the ones to solve the problem could not imagine a solution. And the pilot felt the only option was to stop the plane and kick the rude lady out. The last thing anyone expected was for a ten-year-old child and her mom to have the solution.

The King of Israel thought that he, in all his power had to solve every problem that came along, but there are things he did not know. First, he did not know that a little girl from his nation, now a slave in Aram, had already played a more important role than his in this story. He didn't know that a prophet, Elisha, and a prophet's messenger were at the ready. He didn't know that Naaman's lowly servants would play a huge role in getting Naaman to take the leap and actually be healed.

As in so many stories in the Bible, God's grace is found in the most unexpected places. It's never through pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. It's never through the most powerful working unilaterally. The king of Israel expected he knew how Aram worked: they attack. He expected they would never really ask a favor. Naaman expected he knew how healing worked: the big important person came out and did some kind of fancy ritual. He expected that the rivers in Samaria were inferior to those in Aram. As it turned out, a lowly little slave girl knew that God could work through a lowly prophet's messenger and some of Naaman's lowly servants convincing him to bathe in that nasty foreign river.

We are people of expectations too. We get so stuck thinking there's one way to do this, there's one person responsible for that, there's one way to know the divine.

I think as a progressive Christians it's easy to have an expectation of what a "real Christian" looks like. We have this vision as progressives that the people God is really working through are those who show up at protests with clever signs. If you don't get out into the streets, you must not be following Jesus.

Bruce Reyes Chow is a Presbyterian pastor and author. He says about doing the work of God in the world, "We believe there is only one way, one strategy, one approach. Mine." But, in order to do the work of God,

which is creating a just world, he says “We must not only confront injustice, but we must embrace the idea that we all get there differently.”

Reyes-Chow says Jesus took a four-fold approach to ministry. First, the way we progressive Christians often think of as the “right” way. He calls this way “prophet.” The prophet’s approach is to be an activist, to be an instigator, to be a teller of truths. Jesus was a prophet when he turned over tables in the temple and made a scene for the sake of the oppressed being taken advantage of by those changing money for them to offer in the temple.

But Bruce Reyes-Chow says Jesus has three more ways of achieving the realm of God on earth. The next is another P word: Priest. The priest is the academic, the ritualist, the tender of the spirit. When Jesus stands before a crowd and preaches the Sermon on the Mount, he is being the Priest. He is challenging the minds of his listeners with his assertion, “blessed are the poor.”

The third P-word Reyes-Chow offers is Pastor. The pastor is the relator, curator, and convener of voices. Jesus is acting in the role of pastor when he settles an argument about who is the greatest among his disciples by telling a story that puts everyone back on an even playing field so that they can work together without fighting.

The final P word Reyes-Chow gives is the Poet. The poet is an artist, creator, inspirer of dreams. The poets among us help us reflect. Jesus was a poet when he created street art on Palm Sunday, offering a dramatic, peaceful response to the show of military strength that was a Roman parade.

Many ways of following Jesus faithfully; all extremely necessary. This thing we’re trying to do here at First United is not make everyone just like us. We are trying to be a part of the movement. A movement for God’s reign of peace and justice. Movements don’t just need one kind of person. Movements require networks of prophets, priests, pastors, and poets. Movements require people like Martin Luther King, Jr. being prophets marching in the streets, but they also require people like Bob Dylan singing “The Times They Are a Changin’” in 1964. Movements require pastor types who see those being treated unjustly and run in to treat their immediate needs like Mother Teresa as well as priests who study those needs and write about them like Matthew Desmond who studies poverty and the housing crisis and writes about it in order to give insight into how things can be changed in his book titled *Evicted*.

Some of you are natural prophets, getting into the streets. I’ve seen you there and I’ve stood with you. Some of you are natural priests. You read and study and go to adult ed. You share information and offer me books I should read. Some of you are natural pastors. You are in the chapel after worship anointing those who are struggling to stay in the fight, and you are mediating broken relationships in the community. Some of you are natural poets. You are on the worship music and arts committee or you are writing poetry for our centennial or you are lending your voices to raise a song of protest.

I am so grateful for each and every one of you, whatever your role in the movement is. I want you to hear today that the role you have to play is important. And I also want you to hear that the weight of the movement is not all on your shoulders. Prophets, your being in the street is critical, but there are others working behind the scenes. Lean on them; don’t judge them.

Priests, the information you provide is critical, but some folks learn the hard way and there’s just nothing you can do about it.

Pastors, your healing is needed, but sometimes the prophets fighting and disagreeing need to just fight and disagree for a minute.

Poets, your art is vital for the movement, and if the Priests start to drive you nuts with facts and figures that aren't changing hearts, remember there's a time and place for facts and figures and you can turn them into a song later.

I am also aware that our expectations of how the work of faith should get done affects our worship too. Some of you go home from a more prophetic service feeling disappointed that you heard something that felt divisive. Some of you go home from a pastoral service disappointed that the important issues didn't get raised; it was so warm and fuzzy! I completely understand. Remember that we are not trying to be a cookie cutter church. We are trying to be a movement of peace, love, healing, and justice. It takes a network of prophets, priests, pastors, and poets to make a movement.

So why did the King of Israel start ripping his clothes? He didn't know that it takes a network. He thought he was supposed to do it all himself. He was so wrong.

The compassion of the young Israeli slave girl, the letter writing of the King of Aram, the pastoral support of Naaman's servants, Elisha's attentiveness to the needs of others, and Elisha's messenger faithfully getting the message to the right person. It turns out the weight of the world was not on the King of Israel's shoulders. It can't be all on one person's, or even one type of person's shoulders. It takes a network of interdependence.

We are all a part of this story. We all have a role to play. So against everything our bootstraps culture tells us to do, let's be proudly interdependent. Amen.