

Terms of Surrender

Associate Pastor Adam M.L. Tice
Feb. 15, 2009

2 Kings 5:1-14
Mark 1:40-45

There are several verses that I want to focus in on from these healing passages. They aren't the nicest bits, but they are curious. In 2 Kings, there are verses 10-11: Naaman, the commander of the army of Syria, has sought out Elisha for healing. "Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying 'Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.' But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, 'I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!'"

So Naaman knew not just what he wanted, but how he wanted it. It is as if he shows up at the doctor's office with a prescription pad already filled out — he just needs the doctor's signature.

And how about the healing in Mark? Looking at the last couple of verses, Jesus tells the man, now free of leprosy, to tell no one and to go make the proper offerings at the temple. But the guy does just the opposite. So he gets the prescription, but doesn't follow doctor's orders.

Today's sermon is on a relatively difficult topic; one that carries a lot of baggage for folks with long histories in the Mennonite church. In particular, it carries baggage for those of us who moved from rural Indiana, South Dakota, the great state of Pennsylvania or even Kansas to big cities. That topic is "submission." Yes, this is the word that over the years has been used to keep

women's heads covered and men as the heads of families. It has been used to keep control in the hands of ministers and bishops at the expense of congregations. And it has been used by institutions and hierarchies to enforce conformity and maintain the status quo of power and authority.

Here's how the equation has gone — we are to submit to God. The church represents God, so we are to submit to the church. The bishop and ministers represent the church, so we are to submit to them. And as Christ is the head of the church, the man is the head of the family, so women and children are to submit to the man.

I hope that for many of you, these paradigms sound strange and unfamiliar. I know that for others they are painful reminders of an all-too-recent past. If you are unfamiliar with some of this history, I'd encourage you to ask some of our older members about their experiences.

Because of this baggage, I want to offer a rather elaborate disclaimer before I proceed. There is a very positive side to submission, but we need to deal with the shadows before we can step into the light. So here goes. Christians come together to discern God's will. In this process of discernment, if "Church" means institution rather than gathered body of believers, it might not be God's will. If an interpretation of "God's will" advances an individual's or an institution's agenda at the expense of others, it might not be God's will. If "submission" is an excuse for abuse or dehumanization, it is not God's will. If the discernment of God's will does not involve the people being asked to make sacrifices, it is not

God's will. If a vision of God's will favors a particular gender, race, orientation or any other innate aspect of humanity, it is never God's will.

(And yes, I recognize the inherent irony in making such pronouncements as a pastor from a pulpit. That's why we have a sermon response time — so you can correct me when I'm wrong.)

Now that we've successfully dealt with centuries of abuse, how *do* we talk about submission to God's will? What is left when we scrape away the dross? There are several areas in which this congregation has been seeking God's will for quite some time — our physical space and our relationship to our conference. Both of these concerns, after decades of debate and discernment, seem to be reaching points of decision. What would it mean for us, as we engage these questions for the umpteenth time, to not simply write our own prescription, but to deeply desire to learn what God has in store for us? To determine not simply what is expedient or comfortable, but what will further God's cause in our neighborhood and our denomination? To think beyond our status quo and into a future more expansive than we can imagine?

All of this requires something of a letting go — a submission. Like Naaman, we need to release our assumptions of status and importance. In setting congregational priorities, those of us who have been here only a year are just as essential as those who have been here 30. And those who have not been here yet — those who will be here 30 years from now — are as important as those who are here already.

Naaman not only heard the words of the prophet, but he listened to his servants. It was their persuasion that ultimately led to his submission to God's call. Likewise, we do not simply accept the words of our leaders, but we test them with one another. We give and receive counsel. Hyattsville is good at this part. What will be hard is if some of us do not feel heard or feel that our side has lost out in the process. I pray that we can hold our personal priorities lightly and join together for the good of God's work.

The good news is that in all of this seeking, God is reaching out to us. In one of my favorite hymns we sing that "I sought the Lord, and afterwards I knew/ he moved my soul to seek him seeking me."¹ Even as Naaman stumbled in his search for God, God still healed him. Even though the man with leprosy in Mark disobeyed Jesus instructions, he too was healed.

Surely we have much that we can offer God. We have intelligence, strength, wisdom, aesthetics and passion. I'd suggest that submission isn't so much about the negation of self as the devotion of self — it is offering everything that we have and everything that we are for God's purpose. It is about serving one another in the church community. It is about honoring each other's gifts. It is about inviting God to use us to the fullest. The Naaman story continues with a remarkable conversation. Naaman returns to Elisha and says, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel." (2 Kings 5:15b) And when Elisha refuses payment for the healing, Naaman requests two mule loads of dirt to take back to his country so that he can worship on Israeli soil. And he makes a startling request. He asks that when as part of his duties he has to kneel down in

¹ Author unknown, 1880, *Hymnal: A Worship Book* 506.

the temple of his country's God, that the God of Israel pardon him. Given Elisha's character on other occasions, I would have expected a different outcome from that request. Read up on his story — Elisha is the guy that was mocked by some kids for his bald head — and when he cursed the mockers, some she-bears mauled them. Elisha is not an even-keeled prophet! So when a foreigner offers what might appear to be a half-hearted conversion that understands God to be bound to soil and wants to keep the status and religion that he had before, and all this after initially disobeying Elisha's instructions, I would have expected some sort of thunderbolt, maybe a return of the leprosy... something...but instead, Elisha says to him, "Go in peace."

God welcomes what we offer, and transforms us in the process of offering. But for everything we have to offer God, God has infinitely more for us. Let us bring our offering freely, holding nothing back. And let us receive freely, not limiting God with our own conditions and preconceptions. "Now to God by whose power at work within us is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen." (Ephesians 3:20-21)