

Live Abundance

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II Kings 5
Mark 1:40-45
Psalm 30

Last month I attended the School for Leadership Training at Eastern Mennonite Seminary — pastors week. The featured speaker this year was Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann. He was brilliant and funny, and even swore two nights in a row in the Lehman Chapel, which believe me, raised quite a few eyebrows and some hackles. With an overall theme of “God and Mammon,” Brueggeman explored the idea of two competing narratives that are found throughout the Bible — the narrative of accumulation and the narrative of abundance.

I was probably not the only one awed by the way Brueggemann traced this theme through the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. His work and words have stayed with me so I was keen to read this story from II Kings in the lectionary today. It is not too much of a stretch to read this story through Brueggemann’s framework.

A bit of background on Brueggeman’s narratives. The accumulation narrative is the reality by which the empire operates, and it expects everyone else to buy into this reality too. The narrative of accumulation can be clearly seen in Genesis, in the Joseph saga.

In the cycle of accumulation, we experience scarcity (like the famine in Israel). This scarcity creates fear and anxiety. The empire responds by accumulating as much as possible (to take care of the people, of course), which in turn causes a monopoly.

Recall how the Egyptian pharaoh had all the grain, and in order to get any food the Israelites actually enslaved themselves to the pharaoh so they could survive. The end result of the narrative of accumulation is violence. It might be warfare, it might be slavery but the narrative of accumulation always leads to violence. The pharaohs, in empires of every age, operate under the narrative of accumulation.

As the faithful, we are called to tell a different story, a narrative of abundance. Brueggemann says the faithful venture to ask themselves — “Is it possible to leave the realm of the pharaoh? is it possible to live separate from the empire?” The children of Israel, when they were liberated from slavery in Egypt, when they risked living apart from the empire, encountered scarcity in the wilderness. They were scared; in their fear and discomfort they even remembered their slavery with fondness. But God provided for them in the wilderness, abundantly. True, the manna they collected was unusual and didn't keep well, but the desert wanderers were given ample provisions.

On their good days this led to gratitude. Ideally gratitude unleashes generosity, which in turn creates the community for which we so long. And instead of leading to war and violence, like accumulation does, we are lead to peace, even spreading peace. A whole, healthy human is not possible in the empire, but in the reign of God this is our faith, this is our hope, that wholeness is possible for all.

The story from II Kings begins in Aram, though of course Israel is not immune to the narrative of accumulation. (Remember Solomon and his retinue of slaves, women, gold and palaces? He bought into the accumulation narrative big time.)

The military hero, Naaman, has come home from battle. Conqueror that he is on the battlefield, he fights another kind of battle in his body. He has leprosy, a disease that

carries with it stigma and exclusion from the community. He is anxious about his situation and has become quite difficult to live with.

On one of his previous raids into Israel, Naaman had captured a young woman. She is now a slave in his household. She serves Naaman's wife and hears all about the afflictions that haunt Naaman and his family. Even though she has been taken from her homeland by violence and is now a servant to this family, the young woman is somehow generous enough that she shares, with Naaman's wife, her inside knowledge of the prophet Elisha. This news of a potential cure excites the household, and Naaman rushes off to his king to help him think through what this news means.

The king and Naaman know how the system works, and one must work the system. Surely one cannot directly ask the prophet for healing. These two powerful men of Aram know that health is a scarce commodity, that one must buy healing from a prophet. Naaman and the king of Aram prepare a letter of recommendation to take to the king of Israel who they hope will intercede on Naaman's behalf. In addition, the Aramean king supplies Naaman with silver and gold and a new wardrobe to pay for the healing

When Naaman gives the letter to the king of Israel, the king panics. What is he supposed to do? Is this a trick? Does the king of Aram think that Israel's king has some super healing power? Is this a way to begin a new war? When the king can't heal the military leader of leprosy that will be the excuse to kill the king, bring in the army, capture more slaves, take all the land. The king's anxiety leads him to rend his robes.

The king creates such a commotion that Elisha hears about it and sends a message. "Good grief, stop making such a scene. Send the man to me, I will show him

who the prophet of Israel is.” No word on how the king feels about being dissed like this, but Naaman shows up at Elisha’s door with the whole retinue: horses, chariots and of course the gold, silver and the latest Aramean fashions.

Though Elisha sent for Naaman, Elisha doesn’t come to the door. He sends a messenger, probably his servant Gehazi, to give instructions to Naaman. “Elisha says that you are to go to the Jordan River and wash yourself seven times in the river and then you will be healed. Your skin will be restored and you will be clean.”

Naaman has been hoping for a special, exclusive healing that will make him feel exceptional and unique, a healing that maintains his status as a warrior. He does not appreciate this approach. He deserves a complicated treatment. He is important, he is a fighter. He comes directly from the king. He is prepared to pay for face to face, hands-on healing, from the prophet himself. Strip down to nothing in the dirty Jordan River? He has rivers aplenty in his home country. Why should he stoop so low as to take a dip, or seven dips, in the Jordan. He is angry.

Again, it is his servants who act out of generosity. They have no power and yet they are willing to help this angry, sick man, willing to calm him so he can see what has been offered to him. It is not priceless, it is simple. Why not try it?

So Naaman goes to the river, humbles himself by stripping and dipping seven times in the Jordan and sure enough, he is healed.

When we tell this story in children’s Sunday school this is where the story ends. We have seen God’s power and the prophet’s generosity. Healing is for all, even people who are not God’s chosen people. When children get a bit older:

We might wonder what kind of system this is with masters and servants.

We might wonder why the servants seem to be nice to their masters.

We might wonder about Elisha rescuing the king of Israel from his political quandary.

We might wonder about Elisha, prophet of Israel, agreeing to heal a warrior of an enemy country.

The story doesn't end at verse 14. It continues after Naaman is healed. Naaman returns to the house of Elisha, who this time comes out to greet him. Naaman offers thanksgiving as well as the payment of silver and gold and the latest fashions.

Elisha refuses payment but Naaman is not deterred. If Elisha will not be paid then Naaman will become a worshipper of Elisha's god, the one true god. Elisha sends Naaman away with a blessing, "Go in peace." The great warrior is sent away healed and with a blessing of peace. Another satisfying end to the story.

But the story doesn't end there either. Naaman gathers up his servants and all the gold, silver and gifts and starts for home. Elisha goes into the house, but Gehazi, his servant, watches all that gold go down the road. He just can't bear to let it go. Gehazi, looking around carefully, runs after the entourage. When he catches up to them Naaman jumps down from the chariot, worried that something has happened to Elisha. He is ready to help. The healing he has experienced has changed his outlook, and now he is ready to be generous himself.

"No, nothing is wrong," says Gehazi. "It is just that right after you left two prophets came out of the hill country. Elisha asked me to tell you that they could really use some new clothes and maybe a bag of silver." Naaman is glad to help, giving clothes for two and two bags of silver. He even has two servants carry the parcels as

they go back toward Elisha's house. When they get close to home, Gehazi has the servants put the silver and clothes in the outbuilding at the edge of the property, and he sends them back to Naaman.

Then Gehazi goes into the house to see Elisha, who immediately asks where Gehazi has been. "I didn't go anywhere. I am your servant, I wouldn't go anywhere without your permission." But Elisha is no fool. He says, "Wasn't I with you in spirit when someone left his chariot to meet you? Is this a time to accept money and clothing? Not to mention olive orchards, vineyards, sheep and oxen, male and female slaves. That leprosy of Naaman's is now going to cling to you, and your descendants, forever." So Gehazi leaves Elisha, covered with leprous sores.

Not the happy ending we thought there was to this story. It is almost like the story of Ananias and Saphira in the book of Acts. They bring their offering to the synagogue, but they lie about their assets. They are not honest with their community. Not generations of leprosy for Ananias and Saphira, they just fall over dead.

That's the accumulation narrative, it ends in violence. Greed causes trouble, even death. We want it all and we get more than we bargain for.

Contrast this with the story of Jesus healing a person with leprosy that we heard this morning from Mark's gospel. A man comes begging, kneels down and asks Jesus if he will heal him. He gives Jesus the option, saying "You can heal me, if you choose." And Jesus, taken by this humility, by the acknowledgement of his power, does choose to heal the man. How different from the wealthy warrior who assumes he will be healed, knows how it should happen, and can pay more than a fair price.

The begging man in Mark, a man without name or status, seems to live into the abundance he hopes will be there. He is gracious and grateful even before he is healed. Naaman, a man with a name and a resume, a soldier who holds onto his power with a clenched fist, has a hard time seeing the possibilities. He desperately wants healing but has a hard time letting go enough to receive it.

We live in the heart of the empire. It is impossible not to get caught up in the accumulation narrative. Here accumulation is not only about money, but education and minutes in the media. Is there any hope of avoiding acculturation to accumulation?

Brueggemann suggested that keeping sabbath is the way to get unhooked weekly from accumulation. Keeping a sabbath allows us to practice living into abundance. We let go of control and stop accumulating for one day. Keeping sabbath is identification with God; God rested after creating the world. Brueggemann says, "Sabbath is a deliberate, disciplined pause in the narrative of accumulation. We are most imitating God when we trust creation enough to rest."

"Imitate God?" As Anabaptists we are used to imitating Christ, this is central to how we practice our faith. Be so bold as to imitate God?

"Trust creation enough to rest." I admit that I am so caught up in the accumulation narrative that most of the time I try to find a way to trust creation enough to keep working. On the other hand, I do know the grace of going to sleep when there is still too much to do and dreaming the answer that is needed. I do know that my enslaved brain experiences new freedom when I stop thinking and take a walk. That small sabbath allows my mind to reboot and think clearly again.

Here at Hyattsville Mennonite we work hard, and we play hard. We have a lot on our plates in the next few weeks as we pack and prepare for the big move to University Park Church of the Brethren. There are unknowns, like when will we move and how long will we be there? Will we like it? Will they like us?

Though many of us may be stressed, we will need to find pockets of rest in the coming weeks so that we can remember that even God rested after creating the world. We may need to step back from the details so we can open our hands and receive what creation offers. Like Naaman we may need to let go of what we can pay and realize that it is all much easier and more joyful than we imagined.

I pray that as a congregation we can keep our hearts and hands open in gratitude and generosity. May we stay alert for signs of abundance, for healing and hope among us.