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"Two Good Lessons"

John Wesley United Methodist Church

2 Kings 5:1-27

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You know, with just a few exceptions, many people dismiss the Old Testament portion of the Bible right out of hand. They feel it's too outdated, too out of touch with today's culture and sensibilities. Instead they feel the New Testament is more important, more relevant so to speak. They like hearing Jesus say 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do,' rather than hearing Moses say, 'Thou shalt not do this, thou shalt not do that.'" They like the New Testament with Jesus teaching in such a compassionate and loving manner about how we can live an abundant life. Verses the Old Testament where many of the characters and stories don't fit our understanding of what a godly people are all about. And yet, when asked about the Old and New Testaments, a philosopher once said, "How many of you, when given a brand new, fresh \$100 bill would gladly put it in your pocket, and then take out the crumpled, old \$100 bill and throw it away?" Obviously, none of you would. And that's the point. Because if we look closer at the Old Testament, we do in fact, see people very much like us. People trying to make it through life, people afflicted with disease and pain, people hurting inside, people with many human foibles, people sinning a lot. We see insecure people, unfaithful people, dysfunctional people, as well as adulterers, murderers, liars, schemers, and more. We see how they relate with and to God in their human condition. And through their trials and subsequent redemption, we can learn exactly the same lessons taught in the New Testament about how we can live an abundant life.

Like today's Scripture for instance. Here we meet Naaman, a great and powerful army general and very important man in his country. He was one of the king of Syria's most trusted advisors. He was rich. He had a large household with many servants. Life for Naaman, in a word, was good. That's why I don't think it would be a stretch to say that Naaman was probably somewhat prideful, full of himself, used to getting his own way and what he wanted. But the Bible does say that he had one problem, a skin disease, leprosy. But he heard, through a servant girl of his that the God of Israel, represented by the holy man, Elisha, could heal him. So like any powerful and prideful man expecting to get what he wants no matter what the cost, he goes off to Israel to meet this Elisha in style, with 750 pounds of silver, 150 pounds of gold, and 10 sets of expensive clothing. But when Naaman gets to Israel, Elisha won't even meet with him. Instead Elisha sends his servant to tell Naaman what he must do to cure his leprosy - wash seven times in the Jordan River. What an insult, what a comeuppance for such an important and powerful man! So Naaman gets angry, tempers flare and he storms off. But finally

common sense prevails, when one of Naaman's servants says to him, in effect, "Why don't you just do what the holy man wants you to do. Wash yourself seven times in the Jordan River, even if you don't think it's as clean as the Damascus River. If he told you to do something very hard or very heroic, your prideful nature would challenge you to do it. So why not just do this simple, obedient and humble thing." Why not just do this simple, obedient and humble thing." And Naaman finally submits and miraculously, is made clean. His leprosy is gone. Which leads us to our first lesson – about humility.

Now the virtue of humility is one that I often preach on. Why? Because I believe it's the one virtue that endears us most to God. St. Augustine said, "If you should ask me what are the ways of God, I would tell you that the first is humility... the second is humility... and the third is humility." And, what better testimony than hearing Jesus Christ describes himself when he says, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble, humble, in heart." You see, all Naaman had to do was to wash himself seven times in the Jordan River, and he would be healed, transformed, made whole. But we all know it wasn't the river that did it. It was the act; yes, the act, of humble obedience. Then, as a result of doing this simple act, Naaman was transformed, made whole and ended up praising God! What a lesson that is for all of us! That by performing simple acts of humble obedience to God, we too can be transformed, made whole, made right with God. And perhaps it's a lesson you want to put into practice this week. Maybe your act of simple, humble obedience is to pray, as we heard Rev. Keller preach about recently. For the next seven days, make it a point to pray every morning before you start the day. See what happens! Or make it a point to read a passage of scripture each day for the week. Or commit to go out of your way each day this week and do a good deed, make a call, or send a note, and make a difference in someone's life. Beautiful acts of humble obedience can transform not only your life, but the life of others as well.

But how do we cultivate this virtue of humility? Well that is the perfect segue into the second lesson we can take from today's scripture. And that concerns Elisha's servant, Gehazi. We just heard what happened. After Naaman was cured of his leprosy he wanted to reward Elisha. After all, he had brought with him silver and gold and ten sets of garments for just such a purpose. And just in case you found that peculiar – bringing along garments as potential gifts, keep in mind that in biblical times clothes were a precious asset. They were handmade using raw materials that were very difficult to come by. In fact, that's why the soldiers who crucified Jesus gambled at the foot of the cross over who would receive his garments. They were that valuable! So like I said, after Naaman was cured he wanted to reward Elisha with some of these gifts. Of course Elisha didn't want any of these things, and refused

them. But Gehazi, his servant, felt differently. So after Naaman leaves, Gehazi follows him and concocts a story to get some of the silver and clothes. Of course, Elisha finds out, and the punishment is severe. The leprosy of Naaman is transferred to Gehazi and his descendents.

Now I'm guessing that most of us here probably think that was a rather harsh punishment Gehazi suffered for just for a few pieces of silver and two coats. But you see, the consequences of sin are always far reaching. And although the Bible never gives us much psychological insight as to what goes on in a person's mind, I think if we look closely, we'll find Gehazi's sin to be greed. Maybe Gehazi was overwhelmed by all those beautiful chariots and horses, the gold and silver glistening in the sun, all the beautiful clothes, and was envious because he didn't have those things. Plus, Naaman was a Syrian. And a Syrian or any other foreigner or stranger for that matter, shouldn't have those privileges. Even though Gehazi's own scriptures, in Leviticus, says, "You shall love the stranger as yourself. Whenever the stranger comes within your gates, you shall treat the person with protection and care and love him like one of your own." But Gehazi was greedy. And his sin of greed resulted in more sin – deception and manipulation. But perhaps the worst result of what Gehazi did was that he damaged his relationships. He lied to Naaman to get money. He lied to his beloved friend and teacher, Elisha. And now, what was he going to tell his wife and children, especially his children, as to where he got all those fine gifts? Like I said earlier, the consequences of sin are far reaching.

So what is the whole story of Gehazi really all about? Well, think about it. If Gehazi's sin was greed – then what is the opposite of greed? Isn't it gratitude? Gratitude for what you do have, rather than want what you don't have? You know, an attitude of gratitude can affect our whole persona for the better. For gratitude helps us see life through a joyful lens. I've never known a truly grateful person who was bitter, angry, mean, or greedy. I like how Pastor J. Ellsworth Kalas puts it. He says, "I am grateful for sunshine, because I've known the rain. I am grateful for friendship because I've experienced loneliness. I am grateful for laughter because of the many tears I've cried. I am grateful for my spouse, my partner, my friends, because I know the emptiness of being on my own. I am grateful for each and every day I'm alive because I have seen death. I am grateful for all that I have because I realize I have enough."

And you know – when we are truly grateful, we have no choice but to be humble. For we realize how many blessings God gives to us day after day after day. We realize that we are not responsible for, or even deserving of our own blessings, but that they are gifts from God, given out love for us. Humility and gratitude truly are lessons we need to learn to have that abundant life with God.

I want to close with a powerful message by Brother David Steindle-Rast: ‘Do you think this is just another day in your life? It's not just another day. It's the one day that is given to you... today. It's given to you as a gift. It's the only gift that you have right now. And the only appropriate response is gratefulness. If you do nothing else but to cultivate that response to the great gift that this unique day is, if you learn to respond as if it were the very first day in your life and the very last day, then you will have spent this day very well. So open your heart to all (your) blessings, and let them flow through you, that everyone whom you will meet on this day will be blessed by you, by your eyes, by your smile, by your touch, by your presence. Let the gratefulness overflow into blessing all around you. And then, it will be a really good day.’ Amen.