

What comes to mind when you hear the word “saint”? If you grew up Catholic, you might think of the canonized saints of the church – Saint Peter, Saint Paul, Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Teresa of Avila and the most recently canonized Saint, Oscar Romero. Maybe when you hear the word “saint” you think of someone who is extremely virtuous. Someone who always puts the needs of others first, who is polite and never ever swears. In the protestant tradition of All Saints’ Day, we recognize that all people of God are saints and we remember those saints who lived before us, including ancient ancestors of our faith like Abraham and Peter, and our literal ancestors whose memories we want to honor with photos and stories. These saints are not flawless people. They are simply children of God whom God loved simply because they were God’s creation. We lift them up as saints because something about them taught us about God’s love.

In our scripture this morning, we remember a story about some of God’s children including a few people we might consider saints. We learn that Naaman, who is a commander of the Aramean army, was suffering with leprosy. The word leprosy in the Bible is used to mean a broad category of skin diseases, not only the specific disease of leprosy. But we know that Naaman’s condition was severe enough that it warranted leaving his own country and seeking a cure from a prophet in Israel. His illness is noticed by a young girl whom Naaman had captured during his battles in Israel and was now a servant to Naaman’s wife. She asks about the illness and tells Naaman’s wife about Elisha the prophet who could cure him. With the permission of the Aramean king, Naaman goes to Israel to be healed.

Now Naaman and the Aramean army had recently waged war in Israel and had killed many people and taken captives back to Aram. Returning to Israel to ask a favor could not have been something that Naaman was excited about. I wonder if that is one of the reasons that the Aramean king writes a letter to the king of Israel. He must have suspected that the king of Israel would be skeptical of Naaman’s intentions. So the Aramean king sends a letter making it clear that Naaman is not there for violent purposes but to be healed. Ironically, the written explanation makes the king of Israel extremely suspicious. As people in power often do, they assume that it is the powerful who can fix everything. The Aramean king assumes that Elisha the prophet must be serving in the court of the king and therefore sends Naaman with silver and gold which were customary

gifts to a king. He also writes in the letter that he has sent Naaman “so that you may cure him off his leprosy.” The Aramean king likely didn’t mean that the king would personally cure Naaman, but that as king, he would see to it that Naaman would be cured. Again, as people in power often do, the king of Israel assumes that this situation is all about him. It must be a set up - a trick. He won’t be able to cure Naaman and that will give the Aramean king a reason to wage war again. He tears his clothes in distress believing that he is doomed.

But it wasn’t powerful men who were in control of this situation. It was God. Elisha, a prophet of God hears about what is happening and sends word to have Naaman sent to him. When Naaman arrives, Elisha doesn’t make an appearance, but instead sends a message to Naaman with instructions for what to do. Naaman is to go to the Jordan river and wash in it seven times. With all the stories in the Bible about healings in the Jordan river, we might imagine it as this mighty river with crystal blue water. But in reality, the Jordan is not that large and most of it is pretty muddy. Naaman is not impressed. There are better rivers in his own country, why did he have to come all the way to Israel to wash in some tiny muddy creek? Naaman seems disappointed. Like most of us, he was used to having to earn things. To struggle for a reward. The more difficult the challenge the greater the payoff! Right? But that’s not how God works. Naaman’s servants get it. They know what is going through Naaman’s head and they show him how ridiculous his resistance is. If Elisha had required Naaman to go on some great quest or complete a difficult task, Naaman wouldn’t have thought twice about following the instructions. They convince Naaman to give it a shot and it works.

So who is the saint in this story? Someone who put aside allegiance to their nation in order to help another human being. A person whose faith in God was so strong, that they knew Naaman’s disease could be cured. Someone whose motivation was not to convert Naaman into a follower of Yahweh, the God of Israel, but to simply be a conduit for God’s loving grace. The truth is there isn’t just one saint in this story. Naaman’s servants could be considered saints. They spoke up to a powerful person and challenged his thinking in order to help him. Elisha could be considered a saint of course. Technically he is a canonized saint in the Catholic church. He provided a means of healing for Naaman and expected nothing in return. He didn’t require that Naaman pray to the God of Israel or tithe to the temple. Instead he shows compassion for his enemy, no strings attached.

But there is another saint in this story. Do you know who I'm thinking of? The servant girl. Imagine being in her situation. You are a young girl. The scripture doesn't tell us exactly how old she is, so let's say she is 8 years old. You are living life with your family in Israel. You enjoy helping your mother in the kitchen learning to prepare the traditional foods to make for the holy days like Passover. An army comes in and kills many of the people in your village including members of your family. You are kidnapped by a powerful soldier whom you later learn is in charge of all of the other soldiers and he takes you to a foreign land. He gives you to his wife and you are expected to be her servant. Instead of cooking with your mother, you are now working for the woman whose husband killed your family and friends.

At some point, you notice that the man who captured you has something wrong with his skin that is very painful. You remember there was a prophet in your homeland who could cure people with illnesses like his. What do you do? I know some of us would say nothing. We might think that he deserves to suffer for all the pain he has caused. Maybe we would use our knowledge as leverage. If he lets us return to our homeland, or if he learned about our faith, we will tell him what to do. But that's not what happens. It doesn't appear that the girl wants anything in return for her advice. She simply embodies God's love for another human being in pain.

Last week we talked about not letting hate win, but instead being messengers of love. This story challenges us to live into that love in a deep way. To offer grace and compassion to people who have caused us great pain. Not because we want to grow the church, or because we want something in return. But simply because we are called to embody and share the love God. This is the true meaning of evangelism - to share the good news of God's grace and love with everyone. Not by quoting scripture at them or trying to convince them that our faith is better than their faith or lack of faith. But by simply embodying the goodness and love that is God. This is the call of the people of God. Not just when it's easy, but especially when it's hard. This is the work of the saints.