

THERE IS MORE TO THE STORY—ISN'T THERE ALWAYS

Very often, out of the clear blue, the Lord acts through unlikely people and we are changed.

About 850 years before Christ, Israel was a divided kingdom, North and South. Surrounded by some small countries that often battled with Israel. One such country was Aram or Syria. Today's first reading is just four lines long and it has been chosen because it references a leper who gave thanks to God because he was cleansed and sets the stage for today's gospel reading about Jesus cleansing the ten lepers. But as they say, there is more to the story.

Here is the more. The fellow named in the story is Naaman. He is the general in charge of the army of Aram and the second most powerful person in that kingdom. The Arameans have been sending little bands of soldiers into Israel, attacking, stealing crops and livestock and actually carrying off people into slavery. There is not a lot of love lost between these two kingdoms. In one of these sorties a little Israeli girl is taken and put to work as a servant/slave for Naaman's wife. This little girl becomes a heroine in this story. She knows of the general's leprosy and speaks of it to the general's wife. The little girl says that there is a prophet back in Israel who could cure the General. Notice how sweet this little girl is. She is a captive and she simply tells of her faith conviction about the prophet Elisha. She is not sophisticated enough to use her knowledge as leverage to get released and returned to her home. She just acts out of compassion.

She is an unlikely messenger but there is no hate in her for her mistress or her husband. The girl tells his wife. His wife tells her husband her husband tells the King of Aram. The King of Aram wants his general to be cured. The king of Aram and the general and the wife all take seriously the word of this little girl. And they act on it. The King of Aram gets a significant payment together. (Ten silver talents; 6,000 gold shekels; ten beautiful sets of clothes) and gives them to the general and also writes a letter to the King of Israel extending the gifts and asking for the cure of his general's leprosy. The King of Aram is paying ahead of time for the healing. It is a hefty price he is willing to pay for this cure. He will come to learn that it doesn't work that way. Perhaps in the king's world it does but not in the Lord's world. We just can't buy the favors of God. Because the favors of God are God's free gift. But we are allowed to ask and we are allowed to pray.

Now the King of Israel is just in his castle minding his own business when General Naaman arrives with his entourage and the letter from the King of Aram with all the lavish gifts. The letter requests the King of Israel to heal his general of leprosy. The King of Israel rends his garments. He has no idea how to cure leprosy and immediately thinks he is being set up by the King of Aram. He is immediately fearful and even paranoid. The King of Israel has no idea how to handle this dilemma and has no idea what to do. As it happens, word of the king's dilemma gets talked about all throughout the kingdom of Israel. Word reaches Elisha the prophet. He sends word to the King. Send General Naaman to me. Let him come to know there really is a prophet in Israel. The King is happy to oblige. General Naaman thinks to himself, "All right! Now we're getting somewhere. He and his entourage travel to Elisha the prophet. The general has had a lot of time to think about this meeting and has even imagined how it will unfold. The prophet emerging and bowing low before him and then praying over him and curing him of his malady.

However, the way it actually unfolds is that Elisha doesn't even come out of his hut. He sends a messenger to the general with the message. "Go to the River Jordan and bathe in it seven times. You will be cured." But Naaman is enraged. He has seen the River Jordan. It is not a clean river. There are a lot better rivers in Syria. He turns and leaves, really angry. Elisha lets him go. Does not run after him. Back at camp when the general's servants hear about what happened they look for ways to get his attention and begin to suggest he reconsider. The general thinks that if river cleansing is how he will be cured, he could do that back in his own country. And the dang prophet didn't even come out and greet him. What a snub. The general is proud man with a lot of arrogance. His servants get him to reconsider. They try to get him to reason that if the prophet had asked him to do some great deed in order to be cured he would have gladly done the great deed. All the more now that the prophet asked simply that he enter the Jordan seven times, well, perhaps he should. Who knows? After all, it is about trust—and obedience to the Word of the Lord.

So the general relents and he goes into the Jordan seven times. And he is cured. He lets go of his arrogance. He surrenders his preconceived expectations and is thoroughly surprised. His skepticism doesn't carry the day. His acting in accord with God's Word carries the day. The cure happens. And it is all the little people, the believers without status who carry the day. The general returns to Elisha and tries to get Elisha to accept all the lavish gifts but the prophet refuses. God's favors cannot be purchased for any price. They are freely given. They can be asked for and they can be accepted but they can't be bought. And God cannot be bought. The story has a happy ending. The general humbly asks for two loads of Israeli dirt to be taken back to his Syria. He will kneel to worship only on the earth of the kingdom of Israel because the God of the Israelites is the God who saves.

And so, what lessons do we draw?

- 1) God often works in and through the words and faith of ordinary believers. So, look for Him there.
- 2) Our expectations often get in the way of our actually experiencing what God wants to do for us. So we must do our daily self-examination to see what our expectations are of God and how they might infringe on our participating in God's grace.
- 3) What the Lord desires us to do may seem unusual or make no sense at first. The power of God, though, is often at work in the disguise of the ordinary.
- 4) Even when we have been mistreated we should not give in to hatred. Love your enemy was available even in Old Testament texts before Jesus spoke of it on the Sermon on the Mount.
- 5) There is often more to the story. So, stay til the end—of whatever the task or responsibility is, even Eucharist. It is often at the end that grace shows itself.