

“Which Way Today?”  
August 9, 2020

II Kings 5:1-15a  
Matthew 7:12-14

Last Monday a group of religious leaders in Iowa gathered to, in the words of our opening hymn, pray for health, to plead for friends.” They delivered a petition to the governor’s office asking her to require wearing a mask inside any public building when social distance was not possible. This followed earlier requests by physicians and the Iowa Medical Society for a similar regulation.

With nearly 900 people dead from Covid-19 in our state, Rev. Alex Thornburg, from Heartland Presbyterian Church in Clive, called on the governor to “Lead us in a shared goal of sacrifice for the common good.” He added: “And the easiest first step is to mandate wearing masks.”

This morning I want to speak in favor of the easy way.

I know that’s not what preachers are expected to do. After all, Jesus warns that “the road is easy that leads to destruction.” And our final hymn today pleads to God: “From ease and plenty save us.” As people of faith we often want—and even need—to take the hard path, to make the heroic gesture.

At the same time, Jesus tells us that his yoke is easy, his burden is light. There is a tension here that we need to live with. And remember, it is tension that allows us to stand and walk.

And lest you think I am leading all of you down the wide and easy way to perdition, I want to walk along with Naaman as he chooses a hard path of his own making.

This is a story of healing when no health was to be found.

It is a story of making things more difficult than they need to be.

Look at Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Syria. He is, scripture tells us, “A mighty man of valor.” A good person all around. It even seems that, although he is a foreigner, the God of Israel had given him victory in his military pursuits.

Naaman leads a charmed life. His name even means “pleasantness.”

But there is something unpleasant here. Naaman—good, respected—has leprosy, a skin disease that takes various forms. Generally in his time it was a disease without a cure.

A young girl, held in slavery, knows about health and healing. Showing something of the power of the weak, she says that Naaman should meet Elisha. He could do something. In her captivity she speaks of liberation and release.

So, with the blessing of the king of Aram, Naaman loads up his caravan with "ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten festal garments." That is one heavy wagon—over 900 pounds of money. Plenty of cash to pay for healing.

And he also has a letter of introduction to the king of Israel from his good friend, the powerful king of Aram

It sounds like a good plan.

Naaman has everything: money, power, contacts. He is ready to use all of this to get what he wants.

All of this, of course, gets him nowhere.

Oh, the letter scares the king of Israel, who knows that *he* is unable to cure Naaman.

So Naaman goes with horses and chariots, with all his loot, probably even with that pathetic letter of introduction. He comes to the door of Elisha's house with great expectations. While the king was of no help, certainly this miracle worker can do something.

No doubt, knowing of Naaman's power and wealth, Elisha will come out to meet him. Elisha will call on the name of his God, he will wave his hands over Naaman, and then, finally, he will be cured!

Elisha doesn't even come to the door.

He sends a messenger.

And instead of invoking the name of a mighty deity, instead of the wave of hands, Naaman is told to go wash in the Jordan River.

Not just once. Seven times.

That's it.

You want to be healed? You want to be whole? Go wash in the Jordan.

It's that simple.

It seems like ridiculous advice to Naaman. Aren't there rivers in Syria? And isn't the water of Syria better than the water of Israel? Couldn't he have washed in any of those rivers and be cleansed?

Well, of course Naaman is outraged. Who wouldn't be? He was denied healing by the king of Israel. Now this prophet, who doesn't even show himself, has mistreated him.

He would have been willing to do something more.

His servants join together, most likely out of fear of coming to him individually, and ask: "If the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was 'Wash and be clean?'"

Sometimes the grand acts are needed. But often it is the small, unexpected things that are asked:

simple acts of compassion,

honesty when we could get by with a lie,

love instead of hate.

The path toward wholeness is not always what we would expect. And sometimes—*sometimes*—it is easier than we might expect.

You want to love God? Then love your neighbor. The path to loving God, whom you cannot see, travels through loving the women and men whom you can see.

You want to follow in the ways of Jesus Christ? Then, in everything do to others as you would have them do to you.

It's that simple.

The hard way is always there. And sometimes it is the absolutely necessary path to take.

But let us, especially in these hard times, first look for what might be the easy way.

What easy path can you take in the week ahead that will lead to wholeness of life, fullness of life for you and for those around you?

With all of the difficult decisions you face, with all of the challenges that keep arising each day—is there something *easy* that you might do?

I read this past week about “vaccine optimism”—the result of the regular, upbeat news of ongoing research and testing here in the United State and around the world, the hope that *something* will be ready by early next year or even at the end of this one.

A vaccine is certainly the easy way—not *back to normal*, but *forward into the new world that we will fully inhabit*.

Even as the world rushes at warp speed toward developing an effective vaccine, a hard realism asks us to recognize that it might not happen.

We pray for researchers, scientists, human subjects who are doing the hard work, the heavy lifting.

But maybe what we need to be doing is something easy. Wearing a mask. Doing unto others as we would have them do to us.

*The Washington Post* editorial board reminds us that “President Trump abdicated leadership and shunted pandemic response to the states.” So people of faith head to the Iowa governor’s office to seek effective action, even as cases and deaths continue to increase in Iowa.

In calling for a renewed national effort to mitigate and contain the pandemic, the *Post* said: “The hour is late, but not too late. We need significant quantities of personal protective equipment and high-speed diagnostic testing equipment and supplies — and if the market can’t supply them, the government must step in. Once rampant community spread is brought under control, then plentiful testing, tracing and other measures will be necessary, *as well as face masks and social distancing for a long while to come*.”

And they asked: “Let’s suppose it is summer of 2022, and there is still no vaccine. What would we wish we had done today?”

We will wish that we had taken the easy way: masked up, kept distant, and brought all the pressure we could bring upon our elected officials at all levels to take this pandemic and all of its physical and economic and educational suffering seriously.

Not everything is hard.

Let us seek the easy way that also leads to life.