

Rev. Lisa Schrott

July 13, 2025

Luke 4: 22-30 & 2 Kings 5:1-14

*The Gift Receipt*

When we last left the prophet Elisha, he had just received the mantle from the prophet Elijah - that is he had become Elijah's successor. Elisha used the mantle to part the waters of the Jordan River and cross to the other side on dry land. He then returned to Jericho where he purified the water source for the city. In 2 Kings chapters 2-4, we hear about a string of miracles the Lord enacts through Elisha: providing water during a drought to army of Israel allowing them to have victory over the Moabites, multiplying the oil stores of a widow so that she could pay off her debts; resuscitating the son of a Shunammite woman; detoxifying a pot of soup made from poisonous gourds; and multiplying some loaves of barley to feed 100 men. There was also an incident with some youth who were taunting Elisha and he enlisted two bears to protect himself in a pretty gruesome story. So our friend Elisha has been busy. In our scripture this morning, Elisha continues this trajectory of miracles in the name of the Lord. Hear now these words from 2 Kings chapter 5 verses 1-14:

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from a skin disease. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his skin disease." So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, "Go, then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel."

Naaman went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his skin disease." When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his skin disease? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let this man come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that **for me** he would surely come out and stand and call on the

name of the Lord his God and would wave his hand over the spot and cure the skin disease! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?" Naaman turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, 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'?" So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

How many of you play the *NY Times* Wordle or Spelling Bee online? And a second question for you...How many of you who play look at the statistics that accompany the puzzle? Well, you are not alone. It turns out that the competitive nature of these games is one of the things that drives their popularity, with millions sharing their Wordle success and streaks online. One of the drivers of the Spelling Bee is that you rise through ranks, indicating your success, moving from Beginner to Good Start up to the Amazing rank before achieving the Genius level<sup>1</sup>. Brian and I like to do both the Wordle and Spelling Bee and I confess that I get a secret thrill when we hit Genius or the NY Times bot shares that we did better than the Wordle player. Maybe it is not Wordle and Spelling Bee for you ... maybe it is another online game or a hard copy of the NY Times crossword. Or maybe you remember days of being a pinball wizard or bowling ace. If we are honest, there are very few of us who have not succumbed to this temptation to see how we compare to others.

We live in an achievement-oriented world and too often our value and self-worth is based on these external measures. One of the gifts we get in scripture is to be able to flip this script and recognize the limits of a focus on our individual talents and fortune. To flip the script away from the external judgement of others or the descriptors others use to characterize us. And instead, focus on the gifts we have received from God. The scriptures provide us with a range of intriguing and compelling characters to help us "flip this script." And today's scripture is no exception. We have a cast that ranges from the powerful and proud - an army commander and two kings to unnamed servants who twice turn out to be the voices of wisdom and insight. It is ironic that Naaman, who was a great man and a mighty warrior, esteemed by the community because of his military prowess and battlefield victories, was stricken with a skin disease that his power could not heal. You would suppose that someone with his connections and influence would be able to find help for his condition. And yet, it was a Hebrew servant girl, who shared that there was a prophet in Samaria who could heal his skin condition. Amazingly, Naaman did not trivialize her words and went to the King of Aram. And amazingly the King likewise endorsed Naaman heading to Israel to seek out the prophet, even sending a letter of introduction along. So Naaman heads to Israel and visits the King,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/16/crosswords/spellingbee-puzzles.html>;  
<https://www.today.com/popculture/news/new-york-times-top-wordle-connections-2024-rcna185738>

who with all of his power and importance, not only has no idea how to cure Naaman, but is afraid that Naaman's visit is part of a ploy to pick a quarrel with him.

Now our next intriguing character appears – the prophet Elisha. Elisha hears about the King's distress at the healing request and offers his services. Naaman, with his whole entourage in tow, arrives at Elisha's house. Now you would think – or at least I thought – that Elisha would run out to greet this important foreign official – with all of the pomp and circumstance that protocol would dictate. Instead, Elisha remains in his house and sends a messenger who tells Naaman to go wash in the Jordan River seven times, and his flesh shall be restored, and he shall be clean. If you were asked to direct the movie of Elisha's miracles, this one would be left on the cutting room floor. Pretty anti-climactic. Well, Naaman certainly think so, angrily retorting as he walked away, "I thought that for me he would surely come out and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God and would wave his hand over the spot and cure the skin disease!" I get it. He had traveled a long distance. He had brought with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. And a letter from the King of Aram to the King of Israel. It wasn't as if he just hopped in the car in his pajamas on a whim and said, "It's 106 miles to Chicago, we got a full tank of gas...", to quote Elwood Blues.<sup>2</sup> Naaman had planned and prepared for this trip. He worked for this trip. He got all of his ducks in a row, including gifts for his hosts and this is how he was being treated. What happens when you work hard, and all of your work and planning was for naught? When what you have achieved doesn't seem to matter? Naaman felt disrespected and he was mad. He turned and went away in a rage.

It is the next turn in the story that I find so compelling. Again we have servants providing the voice of reason and wisdom, not some powerful figure. Naaman's servants approached and said to him, "Father, 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'?"

The servants said to Naaman, "Accept the gift." Accept this gift. You do not need to earn it. It is not a reward for your military prowess, for your success on the battlefield, for being a strong leader. It is not because of anything you achieved or any of your personal attributes. It is a gift. Receive this gift.

So Naaman went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan as he had been told. And his flesh was restored and he was clean.

I get Naaman. I understand how he thought things should happen in his healing. When I was doing my chaplaincy internship at the VA Hospital in Atlanta, in one of my de-briefing sessions, my chaplain supervisor shared with me that he noticed I used a lot of "should" language when I spoke. I "should" have been able to connect better with this family, I "should" have seen more patients today. I "should" finish all my charting before I go home, even if that

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0080455/quotes/?item=qt0320069>

means staying late. It was an epiphany moment for me. He was right. I was focused on trying to do the right thing at the expense of the bigger picture. My chaplain supervisor reminded me that words matter – that my internal dialogue affected my outlook and perspective. And that by using the language of “should” I was putting the onus and responsibility on someone else. And that it can ultimately lead to resentment and bitterness and feelings of being put upon and injustice and anger at perceived mistreatment.

And the author of 2 Kings tells us “But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, “I thought that **for me** he – that is Elisha - would surely come out and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God and would wave his hand over the spot and cure the skin disease!”

This is way it *should* work, Naaman is thinking. I *should* receive some kind of personal healing. I *should* be entitled to this considering my station in life. As the Rev. Brian Christopher Coulter says in his commentary about this story that I shared in our words of preparation in the bulletin, “Naaman wants to earn this miracle, not receive it. When egos get elevated to that point, we have a hard time accepting any gift from anyone else without thinking there is some subversive slant to it. We can have a hard time trusting it. We want to attain it. We want to achieve it. We want to win! So even gifts like grace or restoration can create resentment.”<sup>3</sup>

We hear echoes of this in the New Testament passage Barbara read this morning. Jesus is preaching in the synagogue in his hometown. The crowds who are listening are fine until they realize that Jesus is not going to spend his time healing all of their ailments, as he did in other towns. And the crowds rebel – why not us? You are Joseph’s son – you “should” be healing us here in Nazareth. Jesus responds by reminding them of the work of Elijah and Elisha. During the great drought, Elijah brought food to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon, a foreigner, a non-Israelite. Jesus continues saying, “There were also many with a skin disease in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian. When the people heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove Jesus out of the town.”

I often think of these people in the town of Nazareth in what I hear on the news or in social media these days. People upset that someone else received a benefit or a hand up when they themselves did not receive one. Or people happy with what they have, until someone else gets what they have – someone who they don’t think deserves it. Someone who hasn’t achieved it. This way of thinking is equally problematic as thinking we need to achieve more to receive God’s grace.

It is so easy for us to fall into this two-headed trap. On one side, we think that we need to earn God’s love, God’s healing, God’s grace, God’s forgiveness; that we need to do more

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Christopher Coulter. Looking into the Lectionary. Fourth Sunday after Pentecost — July 3, 2022 *Presbyterian Outlook*. Online at <https://pres-outlook.org/2022/06/fourth-sunday-after-pentecost-july-3-2022/>

and be more and get more church brownie points to score God's attention. And on the other side, that we think that others don't deserve God's love, healing, forgiveness and grace because they have not earned it by virtue of their status in life or because of the worst thing that they have done or that somehow they are not as worthy as we are. Both of these ways of thinking are traps because their focus is on us as individuals – ourselves or other people – rather than on God. One of the principles of reformed theology is the sovereignty of God. That is "God is God and we are not." Our salvation – our healing and wholeness- is a gift. The apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians says it this way, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast."<sup>4</sup> In our world today, sometimes it can be hard to receive this gift and sometimes it can be hard to allow others to receive it. Yet that is our task at hand.

I invite you to stand in body or in spirit as we share in a portion of the PC(USA)'s Brief Statement of Faith from our *Book of Confessions* that reminds us that God is the giver and we are the receivers.

**Affirmation of Faith** (from the *Brief Statement of Faith*, 11.4) (in unison)

**We trust in God the Holy Spirit**

**everywhere the giver and renewer of life.**

**The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,**

**sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,**

**and binds us together with all believers**

**in the one body of Christ, the Church.**

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<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9