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## FCC's Vision and Mission: Reclaim and Recommit IV. The Lesson of Naaman

(2 Kings 5:1-16) 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 leprosy. 2 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. 3 She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." 4 So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. 5 And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. 6 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 leprosy." 7 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 leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." 8 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 him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." 9 So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. 10 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." 11 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 leprosy! 12 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?" He turned and went away in a rage. 13 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'?" 14 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. 15 Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before Elisha and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant." 16 But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!" Naaman urged Elisha to accept, but Elisha refused.

If you were asked to pick a dramatic story in the Bible, it likely wouldn't be this one. No, you probably pick something more dramatic: the parting of the Red Sea,

perhaps, or David and Goliath, or the giving of the 10 Commandments to Moses. But nonetheless the healing of Naaman is an important story, and I think it can make a fitting close to our month-long sermon series on re-claiming and re-committing to First Christian's Vision and Mission statement.

Now, while it's a long story, it's really fairly straightforward. Naaman is the commanding general of the Syrian army, an army which had just recently defeated the Israelites in battle. And as one of the spoils of war Naaman had taken as his slave an Israelite girl. But Naaman has leprosy. And in that culture, prior to antibiotics, to have leprosy was a terrible thing that would isolate you from everyone, make your life a living hell. But then his captive slave girl tells him of a prophet in Israel who could cure him, and Naaman heads off to Israel seeking to be cured. Now, I want to suggest that as we work our way through this story, that there are three lessons and reminders about who God is and who we are, three things that I also believe will serve us well in the future as we move forward with the Vision and Mission that God is calling us to.

So first thing: notice who the most crucial players are in this story: they are the servants. There are three key points in this story where the servants, unnamed and unknown, make the miracle possible. It is the Israelite slave girl who tells of the prophet Elisha and his ability to cure Naaman's disease. It is the prophet Elisha's servant, again unnamed and unknown, who goes at Elisha's direction and tells Naaman what he must do – bathe in the Jordan seven times – in order to be healed. And it is Naaman's servants, again unnamed and unknown, who stop him from reacting like a hotheaded fool and storming back home when he didn't like what he was told to in order to be healed. But in each case these servants, unnamed and unknown, did indeed make the whole story possible.. And the lesson that I take from that is that sometimes truth comes from places that we don't expect it. Sometimes helping us recognize who we

are or the true nature of what we're doing comes from sources that surprise us. Self-knowledge can find from sources that we would never have imagined. We read a book and are struck with the insight: the author is describing me! We see a movie and we come to a scene that we are startled to find seems to be about our lives! But we can be also be closed off to the surprises of grace, we can put up walls that keep that grace away or we can categorize people in such a way that we are convinced that they have nothing to teach us. I know I have done such things. I know that I have pigeonholed this or that person, I know that I have even dismissed certain people as having nothing worth hearing or showing or teaching me. Yet, if Naaman had said, "*She is only a slave girl from my enemy, what can she possibly know?*" then there would have been no story, no healing, no relationship with God. And when you or I say, particularly in the face of new challenges and new people that God will be sending our way, "*What can he know? What can she know?*" we run the risk of missing something that could change our lives. The lesson of these unnamed, unknown servants in this story is for us to be open to wisdom, open to grace, open to growth from more than just the places we expect it. For, you see, sometimes our expectations have gotten too jaded, sometimes our hopes have gotten too puny, sometimes the way we've always done it blinds us from seeing the glories of the new ways it could be done. Let us be open to grace, be open to knowledge, from wherever it may come, because, as we re-claim and re-commit to our Vision, for believe me - God IS going to send us grace in unexpected ways.

The second lesson of the story also has something to do with grace. In some ways to me the most astounding part of this story is that the captured Israelite servant girl passed along this news about the prophet Elisha's ability to heal Naaman's illness. Why in the world would she do that? He didn't deserve it. After all, he was the leader

of the armies that had destroyed her home, destroyed her future, took her away from family and friends as a captive. Why in the world would she want to help this man? He didn't deserve it. You would think that she might have taken delight in Naaman's growing disease, gloated at the situation of a man who could control vast armies but couldn't control his own skin. Why in the world would she care if Naaman got better, got healed? *He didn't deserve it.*

But she treated him better than he deserved, much, much better. And that undeserved grace on her part made possible Naaman's healing and his relationship with God. And that reminds me that **God**, thank goodness, treats us better than we sometimes deserve! Which in turn makes for a challenge to us: because of God's grace to us, we are invited in turn to practice the same sort of grace to others. There are people in each of our lives where it would be perfectly understandable to treat them simply as they deserve. And some of them may not deserve very much. But sometimes treating them not as they deserve but instead with grace can lead to healing and renewal. Every teacher can tell you a story of treating a child not as he or she deserved but with grace – and how it changed the young man or young woman. And every one of us, I suspect, can tell a story of when we were treated better than we deserved – and that was what allowed us to move forward or get unstuck or change what needed to be changed. Does that always happen? No, of course not. Sometimes we will treat folks with grace and they do not respond very gracefully. But God must think the same thing about us sometimes – and God keeps on trying to meet us with, as the hymn has it, “grace greater than all our sins.” So I think the second lesson that this story of Naaman can offer us today is indeed a challenge and that is this: As God sends us new people with new gifts, people who may be skeptical of this whole “church” thing but who are desperately seeking something deeper in their lives, let us vow and commit ourselves that in the face of their understandable skepticism, we

shall strive to surprise them with grace – know that God will multiply our graciousness and do great things with them and with us.

The third and final lesson from this story has to do with that little temper tantrum that Naaman throws there in front of Elisha's house. Naaman had gone to Elisha expecting to be asked to do some dramatic and difficult thing, something befitting his status as a mighty general. But Elisha's servant, instead of telling him to do some demanding and difficult thing in order to be healed, basically says: Go take a bath. Seven times. And Naaman throws a temper tantrum when he's told that what he must do is simply go down there to that little river and take a bath seven times. And Naaman gets mad: *"You call THAT a river? We have way better rivers than that in Syria. That's not a river at all. This is an insult. I'm outta here."* Naaman's reaction here – my river is better than your river – reminds me of the old joke about the three boys who were comparing their mothers. These three sons of a lawyer, a doctor, and a minister, were talking about how much money their mothers made. The lawyer's son said, "My mother goes into court and often comes home with as much as three thousand dollars." The doctor's son said, "My mother performs an operation and earns as much as five thousand dollars for it." The minister's son, determined not to be outdone, said, "That's nothing. My mother preaches for just twenty minutes on Sunday morning and it takes six people to carry all the money." My mom can beat up your mom. My river is better than your river.

But such an attitude very nearly cost Naaman both his healing and his potential relationship with God. He felt so insulted that he started to storm back to Syria, and, as I said, it was only due to his servants convincing him to stay that he went down into the River Jordan. And he was healed. He was healed. There are times that we too look for grace, for healing, for wholeness, for hope in some big, dramatic way. We stay stuck in a pattern that drains us thinking that what we need to do is make a huge,

dramatic change in our lives – but that keeps us from doing the small things that are possible. We find ourselves restless or dispirited or anxious and we begin to find ourselves saying “God, give me a sign – a big, flashy, neon sign – of what I should do.” And, like Naaman, sometimes our very pride keeps us from doing the things that could really heal us, help us. But the story of Naaman is the story of grace coming in small things. The story of Naaman is the story of God working through the ordinary – a muddy, dirty trickle of a river. And here’s the thing: the story of Naaman is our story as we re-claim and re-commit: it is the story of our continuing to hone our hospitality in ordinary acts of kindness to everyone, to welcome the stranger in those small ways that communicate great hope, to not celebrate and continue to learn from those changes that continue to come our way. The wonderful writer and evangelical Christian Anne Lamott says this about the ordinary: *“The ordinary is so touching ...and routine and absolutely filled with tiny miracles if we pay attention.”*<sup>1</sup> “If we pay attention....”

My friends, the third lesson from the story of Naaman is exactly that: to pay attention to the grace of the ordinary. Grace and healing and hope are found in a muddy river. Grace and healing and hope are found at exactly that spot where we are paying attention to how much our pride is keeping us from being healed. Grace and healing and hope can be found in a touch that is needed, in a word that was wanted, in a voice speaking up where too many have been silent. All such ordinary things. All such potentially grace-filled things. So this lesson from the story of Naaman is also our challenge as a church: in the coming weeks and months and years, let us indeed pay attention to the ordinary. Pay attention to how God’s grace is moving and working its wonders in even the mundane. Pay attention to those spots where our pride may be keeping us from that grace, and keeping it from others whom God will continue to send us.

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<sup>1</sup>[http://faithalivebooks.com/books/ab\\_trav\\_merc.html](http://faithalivebooks.com/books/ab_trav_merc.html)

Writer Kathleen Norris has a line that I want to leave us with today; she says this:  
*"Prayer is not asking for what you think you want, but asking to be changed in ways you can't imagine."*<sup>2</sup> Let that be our prayer as a church in the exciting days that are to come, as we re-claim and re-commit to what God will do through us, as we continue to seek to be people of radical hospitality, outrageous generosity, and joyful in service. And may we may indeed be changed in ways we can't begin to imagine, trusting always in the goodness of God. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup>Quoted in an interview with Ann Lamott at <http://www.bookreporter.com/authors/au-lamott-anne.asp>