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Naaman Again: An All Saints Sunday Meditation on Dirt

(Genesis 2:4b-7) In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, 5 when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up--for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; 6 but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground-- 7 then the LORD God formed the man from the dirt of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

(2 Kings 5:10, 14-19a from The Message translation) 10 Elisha sent out a servant to meet Naaman with this message: *"Go to the River Jordan and immerse yourself seven times. Your skin will be healed and you'll be as good as new".....* 14 So he did it. He went down and immersed himself in the Jordan seven times, following the orders of the Holy Man. His skin was healed; it was like the skin of a little baby. He was as good as new. 15 He then went back to the Elisha, he and his entourage, stood before him, and said, *"I now know beyond a shadow of a doubt that there is no God anywhere on earth other than the God of Israel. In gratitude let me give you a gift."* 16 *"As God lives,"* Elisha replied, *"the God whom I serve, I'll take nothing from you."* Naaman tried his best to get him to take something, but he wouldn't do it. 17 *"If you won't take anything,"* said Naaman, *"let me ask you for something: Give me a load of dirt, as much as a team of donkeys can carry, because I'm never again going to worship any god other than God."*

When last we saw Naaman, those of you who were here last week will recall, he had come up out of the Jordan River, healed of the leprosy that had threatened to strip him of everything he held dear. Naaman was the commanding general from neighboring Syria, a long-time enemy of Israel during that era. He was at the top of his game, he was honored, respected, and even feared for his military might and leadership. But his skin had turned on him. And when you had leprosy, your whole life could be un-done. Both the Hebrew Bible's regulations and those of other folks' societies in the middle east required the leper to be removed from his family, to be completely isolated and ostracized, to never associate with non-lepers. We can only begin to imagine the horror that Naaman must have felt as he realized that he had this disease, as he wondered how long he could keep it from being public, as he wondered

how long before the king he served would banish him from his job and the life that he had known, move him from mighty general to wandering, unclean outcast. And so, as we heard last week, Naaman headed for Israel and was healed – a healing that was made possible by the undeserved acts of grace that Naaman was shown by folks who would seem to have the least reason to do anything for him! The young girl he had captured for his slave during one of his attacks put him onto the prophet Elisha as a source of healing, and Elisha himself treated this man who had been Israel’s enemy with undeserved graciousness.

And so Naaman was healed after bathing in the Jordan seven times as the prophet Elisha had instructed him. But there is more to this story, and that’s what I want to tell today, before leaving it for good. I love what happens after Naaman is healed. Did you catch the exchange there between Naaman and Elisha after his healing? Naaman is grateful. Extraordinarily grateful. He has his life and his future back. And he wants to thank Elisha. And so he offers him a huge gift. But Elisha turns him down. So Naaman tries again: “**Please** take this gift, please.” The exchange here reminds me of the dinner table when the hostess says “*Please, have some more fried chicken.*” “*Oh, no, I couldn’t.*” “*Please, I insist.*” “*Well, if you insist....*” Naaman really expected Elisha to give in to his blandishments; he assumed that Elisha was just following that same sort of format as the polite dinner guest who really *does* want another helping, but doesn’t want to appear piggy. But there’s something even deeper and sadder going on here: Naaman actions are also those of a man who believes that when all is said and done, **everything** is for sale. You know those folks too, don’t you? Cynical, often bitter people who too often assume that the only motivation that anyone ever has for anything is personal gain; they’re the same folks who will assure you that altruism isn’t possible and that only thing that matters to **anyone** is looking out for number one. The same ones who think that the statement “Everybody has their price”

is somehow a profound observation instead of sadly cynical statement that tells more about them than they know.

But Naaman, dripping wet from the Jordan, standing there with his new skin like a youngster's, discovers something: **grace is not for sale**. The goodness of God is not for sale. God treats us better than we deserve. And while his dip in the Jordan was the occasion for his *physical* healing, it was this exchange with Elisha that marked his *spiritual* healing, his spiritual **conversion** to worshiping the God who graced him beyond his power to purchase! And therein lies the first lesson of All Saints Day. We celebrate this day – and the church has done so for 1600 years – because of our realization of and our profound appreciation for the fact that through the lives of so many other people we too have been graced far beyond what we ever deserved, or merited, or did ourselves. All Saints Sunday is a way of remembering particularly those men and women who have died in the last year, but it is also for remembering *anyone* who was the vehicle for our being graced. For, after all, they didn't have to do it. They were folks who loved us or taught us or raised us or challenged us or comforted us or taught us what it meant to be Christian men and women and we earned none of it.

Forty years ago as a rather sheltered, rather provincial, rather bigoted – I must say – teenager in Ft. Worth, Texas, I went to a Regional church youth meeting that changed my life. The preacher was a man by the name of David Cole. He was powerful, he was eloquent, he was spiritual to the core. And he changed my life. I have sometimes said that if God is a black man, He has the voice of David Cole. Think Morgan Freeman in the role of God in the movie "Bruce Almighty," except even more God-like. After that sermon, I couldn't rest easy anymore with my self-satisfied certitudes and bigotries. I could no longer see those who were hurting or mired in social systems that they didn't create and couldn't easily get out of as simply abstractions. No, they were my **neighbor** and God expected me to do something about

them. David graced me beyond all measure, beyond all deserving. It was the beginning of a transformation that no amount of money could have bought. Thirty years later I was on the Regional Church staff in Indiana and we invited David to be the preacher for our Regional Assembly. I took dibs on introducing him to those 400 hundred or so people gathered to worship. And in my introduction, I told the story that I have just told you and then I said thank you to David for being one of the saints, one of the bearers of grace to me.

Now, by the way, what if David, as a busy minister had said, *"I don't have time to go speak to a bunch of kids at a youth meeting. I'm too busy and have important things to do"* he would have had every right and reason to do that, given the crucial work he was doing in the church and in his community. But what if he had? Well, I know that I might not have given my life to the church; now, I might still have, but I have to tell you that there was a time in my life when that prospect was iffy. But David was one of those saints whose message and encouragement kept nudging me in that direction, and I was so very fortunate to have the opportunity to thank him publically so many years later, for so often we don't get to go back and thank those who have help make us who we are. And I continue to be grateful, not just for me but for our whole church, that he didn't say "no" to speaking at that you meeting, busy as he was, but saw it as a crucial opportunity to help shape faith. Indeed, work with children and youth is some of the most important work you may ever do, and, my friends, they may need exactly the message and encouragement you have to offer.

So, my friends, the first lesson of All Saints Sunday is that it is the occasion for saying thank you to those who have been saints to us. And while I hope you will leave worship today committed to seeking out and finding someone who graced your life in ways that they may not even know, I also hope that our worship today will have been the occasion for you to say thank you to God for those saints that God put in your life

who are now departed but who were for you the bearers and means of grace – and to resolve that following their example, you too will seek to grace someone's life.

The absolutely unearned and unmerited and undeserved grace given to Naaman made him grateful, profoundly, deeply grateful. And once he had gotten past his misunderstanding buying Elisha's favor, how did he show his thanks? By asking Elisha if he could take home with him some dirt from the ground he was standing on. And not just a little souvenir baggie of dirt, but a huge pile of dirt, a mule-team's load of dirt. Hear again how Naaman put it: Well, *"If you won't take anything,"* Naaman said [to Elisha], *"let me ask you for something: Give me a load of dirt, as much as a team of donkeys can carry, because I'm never again going to worship any god other than God."*

Dirt. How many times when I was young did my mother say "Take those filthy shoes off before coming in the house!" Or "Don't you track dirt into this house." *Don't you track dirt.* Well, Momma, you were right. But there is another sense, Mom, that I have to tell you that you were wrong. Because it is impossible *not* to track **some** of the dirt in. For every life does have some dirt in it, doesn't it? And it clings to us. It clings not to our shoes, but to our souls. Now, there is what I will call bad dirt and good dirt. The bad dirt is the kind that seems to follow you wherever you go, no matter what you do. If any of you were ever fans of the comic strip "Peanuts," then you know the character of Pigpen who Charles Schulz always drew surrounded by a cloud of dirt and grime that followed him everywhere he went. There is indeed some dirt in our lives that is like that, isn't there? Maybe it's the dirt of something you **did** that you found shameful and you have felt its dirtiness enveloping you too often and you don't know how to feel clean. Or maybe it's dirt that was done **to** you. Maybe you were treated badly, terribly even, by someone you care deeply about. Maybe it was some unfairness in your life that still seems to sully you, has left a stain on your soul, leaves you

brooding too often still. My friends, every life, your life and my life, has some of this kind of dirt and it is impossible **not** to track it in as we move through life.

And yet even as we recognize that, we also recognize, I hope, the power of God to always remove the **power** of that dirt to weigh us down, immobilize us, or shame us. There is a reason that so much Jewish and Christian imagery talks about God's washing us because that is indeed what God seeks to do – for while the **fact** of the dirt done to us or by us cannot not be undone, its **power** to forever stain **can** be washed away. But there is not just bad dirt, my friends, there is also what I'll call good dirt. Now I can see those of you who take pride in your housekeeping raising your eyebrows at the very thought of "good" dirt. But there **is** good dirt and it does follow us around too, and we do track it in – and thank goodness that we do! For while every one of us has some stain from some of the bad dirt that has either happened to us or we have done, it is also true that every one of us are rooted in – pun intended – good dirt.

My friends, God works through the dirt. God is not a far-off, uninterested, dignified and dainty God who doesn't get dirty. No, God works through the dirt. There is no better illustration of that than the story of the creation of humanity as it is told in the second chapter of Genesis. *"...then the LORD God formed the man from the dirt of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being."* In fact, the literal meaning of the name "Adam" is "the-from-the-dirt-one."¹ And so from the very opening pages of the Bible, dirt is a powerful image and metaphor. Now, as I say, sometimes God is washing away the dirt that clings and stains and mars us. But sometimes God is working **through** the dirt itself to give life and hope; sometimes dirt is Holy because God has worked through it, God has sent us saints to stand on it and to thereby hallow it, and in turn to pass that dirt along to us that

¹Viz. Gerald Janzen, Professor Emeritus, Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Indiana. Cited from memory.

we too would be rooted and grounded in grace. It is by standing on such holy ground that we can be transformed.

And **that's** why Naaman wanted to take the dirt back. For his life was now forever transformed by the ground that he had stood on, by the man of God who hallowed that ground forever by treating him – even though he had no reason to deserve it – with grace, seeing him for *the best that he could become rather than for the worst that he had been*. That is indeed holy ground. And Naaman wants, needs something **tangible** to remind him of it when its grace and truth seem dim, when he was tempted down the line to let the bad dirt of his life overpower the good dirt, the holy ground, on which he had been changed. He wanted to go home and be able to kneel yet again and again on a piece of the place, a part of the grace, that had cured him and convicted him and converted him.

My friends, on this All Saints Sunday I would invite you to do two things: First, if there is bad dirt swirling about you, if you find that it continues to stain you and you are tracking it in places in your life where it mucks things up, then ask God to show you where and how you can be healed, where and how you can be washed. You may find it easier than you thought. For Naaman it was simply stepping in that little river. For you it may be a simple prayer for God to forgive you and to ask for the courage to truly believe that God has done so. If it was dirt that was done **to** you, pray that God might stop it from staining you, scrub away its power over you. For God wants those things so much for you. But second, give thanks this day for the ground that you have been privileged to stand on, that has been made holy and hallowed by those who have gone before. Give thanks for how **that** dirt too has clung to you in **wonderful** ways, for how it has rooted you, for how it has nourished you. It is ground that the saints have sanctified and for all those saints, who from their labors rest but who continue hallow our ground and to live on in our lives, thanks be to God. Amen.