

2 Kings 5:1-17 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. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." <sup>4</sup>So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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." <sup>7</sup>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." <sup>8</sup>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."

<sup>9</sup>So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. <sup>10</sup>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." <sup>11</sup>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! <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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'?" <sup>14</sup>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.

<sup>15</sup>Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant." <sup>16</sup>But he said, "As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!" He urged him to accept, but he refused. <sup>17</sup>Then Naaman said, "If not, please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the Lord.

Look closely at the characters in this story. There's Naaman, the great warrior. There are two kings. There's Elisha, the prophet. Who else? Naaman's wife, but she doesn't even have a

speaking part, and the servants. (With some awe) Without the servants, there would really be no story, no healing after all, and no happy ending.

There would be no story to remember. But this story was remembered, handed down. Jesus knew this story and in fact he referred to it is the story from the scripture text in Luke I preached on a few weeks ago. In that scripture Jesus explained why he would not heal in his hometown of Nazareth. "Now there were many lepers in Israel at the time of the prophet Elisha," Jesus said, "but none of them was cleansed except Naaman, the Syrian." Jesus didn't mention the servants, but there would be no story without them.

The story does begin with Naaman, commander of the army of the king, a great man in high favor with his master. Naaman is an important man, a four-star general, head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, decorated for military victories, in favor with the king, one of the inner circle. Naaman was a force to be reckoned with.

The story begins with a powerful man, but then it takes a turn. In addition to being a mighty general, he suffered from leprosy.

Now we have different image of Naaman. All the greatness in the world can't change this one terrible detail that he suffers from a disease so awful that his skin looks rotten.

Then someone else enters the story very differently from the well respected general. She is a slave, carried off in a raid into Israel. Warriors often carried off plunder from their victories, such as gold, silver, chariots, horses, and slaves. They could have what they wanted. This particular slave girl had been carried from her home and now served Naaman's wife. She is as small as Naaman is big. The power he has is the power she lacks.

Yet, she speaks! "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria," she told her master's wife, "he would cure him of his leprosy."

Two questions: Why did this girl care about this man whose army had taken her away from her home, her Israel? And, why did Naaman and the king listen to what this slave girl said?

We don't know, it's not in the scripture. We only know that everyone else in the story feels so important and assumes that they are the center of attention. The king Aram gave Naaman permission to go. So Naaman leaves to visit the king of Israel bearing lots of presents and a letter detailing his request from his king. But when the king of Israel reads the letter, he's feels put on the spot. "Am I God," he asks, "to give life or death that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?" It doesn't occur to the king that he wasn't in the center of things.

But story continues, despite the fear of king of Israel. Enter Elisha, the prophet. "Send the man to me so that he may learn there's a prophet in Israel."

Naaman and his entourage, gifts and all, go to Elisha's house. And Naaman makes a big scene. Elisha doesn't come out of his house, despite the big show. He sends his SERVANTS out with a message for Naaman. "Go, wash seven times in the Jordan and you will be clean."

Well, Naaman isn't used to this treatment. He's an important man. He's used to speaking with kings, his own king and the kings of other nations.

He feels insulted by Elisha and refuses to wash in the muddy Jordan. He even scoffs at Israel's river. "Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?"

With that, Naaman turns toward home. And that would be the end of the story, except for his own servants.

They say, "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?'"

They have made their point and even saved Naaman's life, though they are the lowly SERVANTS. Of course, he'd do something difficult, why not give the muddy river a chance after he had come this far.

He went into the river, and immersed himself seven times. When he came out of the water that last time, he looked down at his hands and his feet. His flesh was like the flesh of a young boy.

None of the servants ever said, "I told you so." Naaman would not have been restored to health if he hadn't listened to his servants. Without the servants, there would be no story.

Millions of the world's people must feel that our country treats them like servants: because they have no better option than growing our coffee beans, making sneakers, gathering our oil. We are a mighty nation, but our over-consumption of the world's resources is a sign of sickness rather than health.

Even in a falling market, the wealth of the United States exceeds the wealth of the whole developing world.

Without those servants, there would be no story of the US. As Christians in the US, we need to think about that.

Along the same lines, everyone is familiar with the immigration debate. As I was thinking about the idea of the marginalized servants of the US, I thought about this satirical fake documentary movie made a few years ago called *A Day Without a Mexican*. The movie begins when one morning all the Mexicans had disappeared without a trace from Southern California.

In a comedic way, the white society becomes helpless without their Mexican servants and illegal immigrant workers to do their manual labor. In the fake interviews, one man complains "no valet parking, forget about getting your glass of water at restaurants."

The movie has a good point that Mexicans were usually the ones filling jobs like these.

When a small group of us went to visit a church in Louisville last Sunday evening, we stayed for a meal in which the pastor, Jud Hendrix, showed a slide show presentation and talked about the

trip around the US he had taken with some other people. Their mission was to learn more about where the food we eat and the resources we consume come from.

Most of us do not know where our food comes from. If we buy our vegetables in the grocery store, most likely they come from far away. Most of the food most of us consume is not local to our area and in fact comes from more than 100 miles away.

Jud told us one place the group visited for a few days, was inner city Detroit. The people of this area lived within walking distance of many fast food restaurants, but no grocery stores. The poorest people ate the fast food because it was convenient. The group met people who were trying to set up a community garden in this inner city area....a step in the right direction for those who care about the people living in that poor community.

What we eat and where it comes from matters. We need to be aware of how our eating habits affect other people. You know that I like coffee a lot. Some coffee beans are harvested by poor laborers in African and Latin American countries and sold to large coffee corporations like Folgers. But Juan Valdez and those who put in the work up front may be getting a bad deal as they are paid little by the large coffee corporations because they can get away with it.

I've noticed that Starbucks has had more fair-trade coffees in the last few years, which means that when you pick up the bag, the bag tells you that the foreign coffee farms were given a fair market value for their beans, not exploited.

There would be no story without the servants. Those who made the movie A Day Without a Mexican, those who planned Jud's trip are trying to listen to those people who are in positions of servitude.

Naaman was a powerful general, but all that could not restore him to health. There would have been no healing if he had not listened to those who had little influence.

How can you and I help our nation learn to listen?