***“Tis The Gift To Be Simple”***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on July 6, 2025*

*based on Luke 10:1-11, 2 Kings 5:1-14*

The Hebrew Testament text for this week tells us that Naaman the Syrian "was a great man." It also tells us that his greatness, or rather, his sense of his own greatness was nearly his undoing. The reading tells us that when this Aramean general went down to Israel, formerly enemy territory, he went reluctantly. And when he finally got himself ready to go he did not go with merely carry-on luggage. No . . .

"He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold,” and ten changes of clothes, not to mention a huge entourage riding in gilded chariots.

"So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha’s house. Elisha sent a messenger (a commoner in a sports jacket he’d grabbed off the rack at J. C. Penney) who came to Naaman, saying,

'Go, wash in the Jordan seven times and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean. Have a nice rest of your day; goodbye.'” He was almost that abrupt.

"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! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the muddy waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?” Then he turned on his heels, and went away in a rage.

Poor Naaman; he just wasn't used to be treated like someone traveling coach class.

But his servants approached him, knowing just how to deal with his billion dollar ego: “Father" (they call him, “Father”) "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he asked was that you do something simple." Something . . . simple.

So Naaman swallowed his pride and braced himself, readying to swallow an ocean of muddy water. He took off his clothes in front of this company and immersed his puggy middle-aged man's body seven times in the Jordan, and "according to the word of the man of God" his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little fresh-faced boy, and he was clean.

One commentator says that Naaman "was completely emptied out" by the ordeal. Finding out that his royal connections had gotten him nowhere, his bags of money buying him nothing, and that Elisha the prophet would not even come out of the house to meet him, Naaman was faced with one mighty humiliation.

But then, he'd set himself up for it, didn’t he?

You know, even after the healing, Naaman STILL tried to pay Elisha for the cure. He wanted to be square with the prophet. He wanted to pay his own way. But Elisha wouldn't take it. "God has no use for your money," the prophet was saying.

Naaman had to abandon the pretense that who he was, or what he was worth, could get him what he needed. What he *truly* needed.

As the Shaker hymn says, "Tis the gift to be simple, tis the gift to be free, tis the gift to come down where we ought to be."

Naaman wasn't just healed; that was the least thing that happened to him. Old Naaman had to be brought down to "where we ought to be;" a place where the air is better and one doesn't need to be burdened with the weight of pretense.

Sometimes it’s critical for us to be brought low, humiliated a little, not because God likes to see us squashed or made small. Not at all.

But, if we are beginning to take some things for granted that we shouldn’t, or if we begin treating people like objects instead of beloved fellow humans because we think we are God’s gift to the earth, our self-assessment is in need of adjustment.

Having said that, it’s also important for me to add that sometimes we might think too little of ourselves. If so, we might be in need of lifting up. As the song said, it’s all about getting to where we need to be – wherever that happens to be.

Tom Junod told a story about this second kind of needed adjustment many years ago in a series of pieces he wrote for *Esquire* magazine on Mister Rogers. It’s still worth quoting.

*Once upon a time, there was a boy who didn't like himself very much. It was not his fault. He was born with cerebral palsy. Cerebral palsy is something that happens to the brain. It means that you can think but sometimes can't walk, or even talk. This boy had a very bad case of cerebral palsy, and when he was still a little boy, some of the people entrusted to take care of him took advantage of him instead, and did things to him that made him think that he was a very bad little boy, because only a bad little boy would have to live with the things he had to live with. In fact, when the little boy grew up to be a teenager, he would get so mad at himself that he would hit himself, hard, with his own fists and tell his mother, on the computer he used for a mouth, that he didn't want to live anymore, for he was sure that God didn't like what was inside him any more than he did.*

*[Now} he had always loved Mister Rogers . . . and now, even when he was 14 years old, he watched Mister Roger’s Neighborhood whenever it was on, and the boy's mother sometimes thought that Mister Rogers was keeping her son alive.*

*She and the boy lived together in a city in California, and although she wanted very much for her son to meet Mister Rogers, she knew that her son was far too disabled to travel all the way to Pittsburgh, so she figured he would never meet his hero, until one day she learned through a special foundation designed to help children like her son, that Mister Rogers was coming to California and that after he visited the gorilla named Koko, he was coming to meet her son.*

*At first, the boy was made very nervous by the thought that Mister Rogers was visiting him. He was so nervous, in fact, that when Mister Rogers did visit, he got mad at himself and began hating himself and hitting himself, and his mother had to take him to another room and talk to him. Mister Rogers didn't leave, though.*

*He wanted something from the boy, and Mister Rogers never leaves when he wants something from somebody. He just waited patiently, and when the boy came back, Mister Rogers talked to him, and then he made his request. He said, "I would like you to do something for me. Would you do something for me?"*

*On his computer, the boy answered yes, of course, he would do anything for Mister Rogers, so then Mister Rogers said, "I would like you to pray for me. Will you pray for me?" And now the boy didn't know how to respond. He was thunderstruck. Thunderstruck means that you can't talk, because something has happened that's as sudden and as miraculous and maybe as scary as a bolt of lightning, and all you can do is listen to the rumble.*

*The boy was thunderstruck because nobody had ever asked him for something like that, ever. The boy had always been prayed* ***for****. The boy had always been the object of prayer, and now he was being asked to pray for Mister Rogers, and although at first he didn't know if he could do it, he said he would, he said he'd try, and ever since then he keeps Mister Rogers in his prayers and doesn't talk about wanting to die anymore, because he figures Mister Rogers is close to God, and if Mister Rogers likes him, that must mean God likes him too.*

*As for Mister Rogers himself ... well, he doesn't look at the story in the same way that the boy did or that I did. In fact, when Mister Rogers first told me the story, I complimented him on being so smart--for knowing that asking the boy for his prayers would make the boy feel better about himself —*

*Mister Rogers responded by looking at me at first with puzzlement and then with surprise. "Oh, heavens no, Tom! I didn't ask him for his prayers for him, I asked for me. I asked him because I think that anyone who has gone through challenges like that must be very close to God. I asked him because I wanted his intercession.”*

A young adolescent with cerebral palsy who thinks too little of himself. A Syrian General who thinks too much -- Phillip Brooks has these wise words to say about the need to have our self-concepts adjusted both up and down. In doing so he brings in the word humility. He defines it in a way you might find new.

"The true way to be humble is not to stoop until you are smaller than yourself, but to stand at your real height against some higher nature that will show you what the real smallness of your greatness is," or, may I add, the true greatness of your smallness, if you're like Mister Roger’s young friend.

Now, looking at the gospel lesson from Luke chapter 10 that has been paired with the story of Naaman, the general, we can see that the lessons we have been discussing bear heavily on some particular concerns Jesus was dealing with, having to do with his disciples.

They are about to go out two-by-two to announce that God’s reign has arrived; is fully present in the world. No one needs to stand waiting for the second coming; no one needs to look for a chariot to come from the clouds. No, Jesus is here and he’s the real deal.

No one needs to wait to hear a thunder-clap that will announce that Roman rule in Palestine is over. Rome’s power will eventually collapse under its own imperial weight. This is what happens to empires that serve the rich few at the expense of the masses.

God’s power, conversely, is present and abundant in the open-hearted love, healing, and empathy of Jesus.

This Palestinian peasant may seem puny to the naked eye, (I mean, he looks like a total loser to someone like JD Vance or Steven Miller) but the power of God’s message through him will overcome every impediment including his Roman execution.

It’s not going to be a message anyone will understand right off. It’s so simple, unadorned, and it calls for a simple, unadorned delivery. It also calls for maximum integrity from the message givers. So, Jesus has the following advice for seventy of his followers who will carry it. He says,

*When you go out now to tell people about the kingdom of God, I want you to* ***not*** *take a lot of extra baggage. Just go with what you have at hand. Depend on the hospitality of those who welcome you. And when you go, don’t move from house to house looking for the best place to sleep, saying things like, “Boy that bed’s hard. I’m going to spend part of tomorrow looking for a better place. No, stay where you are because I don’t want anybody to get the impression that you’re comparing members of that community favorably or unfavorably with one another according to their income. Whether it is a straw mattress or something that enables you to float in mid-air, you just accept it. And whatever they set before you, you eat it. Don’t look down at the table and say, “What, chicken again?”*

Jesus is saying that what is set before these fellows to eat will sometimes be Jewish food, and sometimes Gentile food. He’s saying, “Don’t reject one or the other because I do not want anyone to think we make any racial or ethnic distinctions before God. I want you to make clear that everybody, whether they feed you out of their food stamp allowance, or whether they entertain 30 guests every night with food they get from The French Laundry; before God it’s all the same. Is that’s clear?” And then I want you to say to them, “Now the kingdom of God is here.”

That’s the good news; God’s love and grace is present in the person of Jesus himself. It’s not on its way. No, it’s right here. There’s been no mistake. This is the world God wanted everyone to be born into no matter what their circumstances. God is busy, patiently working God’s will out in their lives through those very circumstances.

And this is the hardest lesson for so many people to get. Most think there has been a mistake and that they need to be tons richer, healthier, more beautiful, more talented before anything good and worthwhile can actually happen through them. Some take almost a lifetime to learn this lesson. Some, sadly, never learn it at all.

Jesus also says, “Now, you will go into some places where they will reject you. You won’t be welcome. You will receive no hospitality, no food. Nothing.”

“Well,” they ask, ”What are we to do then?”

Jesus says: “Follow the ancient pattern – shake the dust off your sandals – not in anger – just perfunctorily. Just like you do when you’re putting your sandals on every morning, sitting on your doorstep. By doing this, you will be saying without words, ‘I leave you to God. In time, maybe you’ll understand.’ Whatever, don’t fuss at the people.”

And someone asks him, “But what if they say ‘No,’ to the message?”

Well, says Jesus, It’s not up to you to get anybody to say, ‘Yes.’ . . . . Or ‘No,

for that matter.” How they respond is not your business. Leave that to God. You just give them the Good News that God’s kingdom is present and alive just as things are.

Whether they accept what you say or call you an idiot, let your demeanor be the same. Just say, ‘The Kingdom of God is here, on earth, and available to all people.’”

Jesus says, “I’m telling you this because I want you to understand that your message, your life, your behavior, are not to be determined by other people. Don’t react to them. Just deliver the message, be yourself. Whether they say yes or no is not the point. You are to be children of God.”

“Remember my teaching – If you only speak nicely to those who speak nicely to you, what is that?

If you only offer hospitality to those who offer it to you, what’s that? If you are only generous to those who are generous to you, what is that?

“You are to act as God would act. And yes that is a tall order, but it’s what you are to do. And, you know. It’s simpler that way. God is love and God acts out of love and so should you.

Remember, God sends the nourishing rain on the just and the unjust just just the same, and so should you. Behavior from you that is any different is not from God.

If someone won’t hear you out, or spits in your face, just move on, and say,

‘The power of God is present here in this place. I’m sorry you find it hard to see.’ As God acts out of God’s character, you act out of yours. Don’t let other people dictate the situation. Be consistent. Be yourself. Without baggage, without an agenda. You don’t need to puff yourself up bigger than life, or humble yourself down so you’re small and wincing. No, stand at your true height and deliver your life’s message, whatever it be, “as-is.” No apologies. No hype.

You know, some time in your life the best advice you ever got was this kind of advice: You don’t need ten sets of clothes, an AK 47, or a parachute. You don’t even need to carry a flashlight.

Sometimes to do the most important thing you’ve been put on this earth to do, whatever it is, all you will need is the standard issue You. Anything added will just take away from what you have to offer.

Why? Because God didn’t make a mistake when you were made. To fulfill your mission in this life you have just what you need.

Look at the birds of the air -- they fly with such precision. They fly right through trees and never run into a branch. They land on limbs with apparently no effort. They never think; "Uh oh, I'm up so high here, I’m terrified I'm going to fall."

"Tis the gift to be simple tis the gift to be free, tis the gift to come down where we ought to be."

Amen