

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Guest Preacher: Rev. Marvin J. Caldwell

February 15, 2009 Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

II King 5:1-19a

The Promise of Baptism

In February of 2004, I preached about Naaman from this same text. Recently, I read an article that suggested this story was rich in the imagery of baptism. With that focus, I read the story as if for the first time. It brought up memories of a cool, early morning in early May. We stood on a lovely bluff with the Cold River about 100 feet below us. Fall Mountain rose behind us bathed in the early morning sun.

It was Confirmation Sunday. Two of the confirmands had not been baptized. They did not want to be sprinkled, but baptized by full immersion. A friend offered the use of her hot tub, which was built into one end of a small, graceful pool. A third confirmand also wanted to experience full immersion. Jesse understood that he had already been baptized. He said his mother had made promises for him. Now he wanted to make his own promises to God; to experience going under the water; dying with Christ to rise with Christ; to experience the promise of living a life with and in Christ Jesus.

We stepped into the warm water. I reminded Jesse that he had already been baptized. This was a renewal of baptismal vows.

Naaman stood on the bank of the Jordan. He was stripped to his loin cloth, the white areas of diseased and dead skin all the more prominent for being so starkly displayed on his lean, muscular body. He was strong with desire and need.

What do we desire? What do we really want and need to be full human beings? We need to belong and to be included in something larger than ourselves. We need to love. Loving is not enough. We need the reciprocity of loving and knowing that we are loved in return. Along with love we desire intimacy, that special closeness shared by people who love and trust each other. We want to be productive, not just busy, productive. We want a purpose in our lives and we want to go beyond ourselves. We want transcendence. We want to be happy. Not just ephemeral happiness, but deep seated joy that permeates our lives and attitudes and all that we do.

Madison Avenue knows our needs probably better than we know them. Just look at the ads to see how well advertisers know us and manipulate us. Ads are more successful than we would like to admit. Beyond shelter, food and clothing, our basic needs are spiritual. Madison Avenue makes promises the mall cannot keep. Try religion instead.

Naaman was loved and trusted by his king. He had a wife on whom he doted. But. . . But he was a leper. Most people went into his presence because he was the general of all the armies and could command it. Otherwise people crossed the street to avoid him. He did not belong. It's hard to find intimacy with people who dread and fear being in your presence. How desperately did he feel the need to be fully human again, whole and able to give and receive, to know the joy of close friends?

The promise of baptism is that of belonging. Water drips from our faces as we look out at the happy, smiling faces around us. One of the greatest perks and responsibilities of this promise is to become a member of the Body of Christ. This is the ultimate in belonging. Infants are paraded around the congregation as the pastor babbles happily for the child to have a good look at all these brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles. The promise is to be part of something far larger than ourselves. These are the people who pledge to have our backs as we grow up.

This pledge continues into adulthood. Here are people we can count on when the going gets rough. They will prepare meals, sit and listen, mow lawns, and do all the things that will get us through a bad patch in our lives. And then we on the receiving end become givers in our turn. Not because we have to, but because we are members one of another. Your sorrow is my sorrow. Your joy is my joy.

The rite of baptism in the UCC Book of Worship has these words:

"In baptism, God works in us the power of forgiveness, the renewal of the Spirit and the knowledge of the call to be God's people always."

Jesus said that those who do his Father's will are his mother and his brothers and his sisters. The realm of God is whenever and wherever God's will is done. In baptism God makes these promises.

When Jesus healed the lame and cleansed the lepers he sent them to the priests to certify that they were clean and could rejoin society. They were certified fully human, acceptable, and loveable again.

We stood in the water, family, friends, fellow confirmands gathered 'round. Jesse declared his love of God in Jesus Christ, affirmed that he accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior. He renounced the powers of evil and chose new life in Christ. He declared his desire to love justice and do kindness as he lived and grew in Christ. I put my right hand on Jesse's back, my left hand on his chest and began to lower him into the water. He yielded to me, putting his full faith and trust in my hands. Jesse trusted I would not let him fall. He trusted I would lift him up out of the water. He trusted the Spirit would fill him.

Naaman looked at the stream. Would this really satisfy his deepest longings? For a man used to saying the word and it was done, it was undoubtedly hard to set aside his ego and his pride. Elisha wouldn't even come outside. No bells, no whistles, just a message by a servant: "Go and bathe seven times in the River Jordan and you will be clean."

Here he was, nearly naked, vulnerable, trusting without having a solid foundation on which to base that trust. Naaman took the word of a girl, a slave who served his wife. She had said, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria. He would cure him of his leprosy." And so Naaman went with the hope of desperation. Naaman stood on the bank of a stream he had ridiculed, knowing he had to put his whole self in the Lord Jahweh's hands.

God makes many promises to us. God will provide for us. God will lead and guide us. God will be there for us. We have no need to fear. Tragedy may come and disappointments.

There have been times in my life when what I wanted most of all was to sit on God's lap, wrapped in the everlasting arms. Moments like that are precious. The sense of love and presence is filling and fulfilling. It creates a peace and serenity that truly goes beyond understanding. I know many of you have felt God's presence in that intimate and loving way. It enables us to get up, dust off, and go on. No matter what.

God is there in the midst of the wrong to bring the best possible good out of the worst for those who trust. God has given us everything, even coming in human form to live amongst us full of grace and truth to lead us into grace and acceptance of freeing truth.

God in Christ Jesus died on the cross, taking our sin with him. What does God desire of us in return? Nothing less than our whole selves. Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, body and soul. God desires nothing less than our whole selves given freely in love. What we receive in return is love, joy, and life beyond imagining.

Jesse was ready to promise his life to the Lord. The promise of baptism is a promise of new life. Jesus assured Nicodemus that we must be born again to enter the kingdom of heaven. "How can we return to our mother's womb and be reborn," he scoffed. It's a rebirth in and of the Spirit, Jesus told him. Baptism promises to wash away all sin and the stain of sin. We are fresh and new. Like a baby, our whole lives are ahead of us.

Naaman stepped into the water. He lowered himself into the stream until he was completely immersed. Sputtering, gasping for air, he rose and dove under the waters again and again. Did he pause to look at his skin? Nothing. Just like before only now he was dripping wet. "A little breeze and I'll surely catch a nasty cold. Why wouldn't three times do the trick?"

Arnold Schwarzenegger spoke of his work as a body builder. It was in the reps, he said. You have to go further than you think is necessary. It takes discipline to do that one more rep, and yet again another rep, one more sit up, one more leg lift, one more pound on the weights. What really works is the discipline of sticking with it beyond what one might think reasonable. One more act of kindness, one more thank you note, one more time of being with God in prayer, one more percentage point in giving until we become tithing people in a tithing church.

Seven is a holy number. Elisha said seven reps, seven complete dips in the river. Here goes, a deep breath and under the water, four, five, six times. Isn't that enough? His skin was as it had been. Was God testing him? Did he believe? Had he humbled himself, yielding his ego and

pride? Had he truly thrown himself on the grace and mercy of God? A seventh time he dipped into the stream fully obeying Elisha. This time when he rose from the water his skin was soft and supple. The dreaded white, dead skin was gone.

God had gone beyond what was asked, a cure of the leprosy, and gave Naaman boyishly youthful skin. He rose reborn from the waters. Here was a fresh start. Naaman had yielded completely to the Lord Jahweh and was renewed. He had waited upon the Lord and now he was reborn. He was not only physically reborn with new, youthful skin, he was spiritually reborn. He knew—without a doubt he knew who had done this. "There is no God, but the God of Israel," he declared to Elisha when he returned to give thanks. Naaman vowed to never again pray or sacrifice to any but the Lord Jahweh.

Jesse experienced the awesome mystery of rebirth when he submitted himself to God in Christ Jesus. Naaman experienced the awesome mystery of rebirth when he submitted himself to God. Would they always be perfect? Would this new understanding always keep them on the straight and narrow, never deviating? Of course not. But now they had greater resources: God was with them as they were with God.

Love requires that we seek the pleasure and well being of others before the pleasure and well being of ourselves. This is a key to a good marriage, good friendships, and good family relations. It is a part of transcending ourselves. Once centered in God, we can then be centered on others. Naaman recognized God's new place in his life. He took home soil for an altar to Jahweh God—for he still perceived gods as located within the nation—and he thought of the king who loved him and relied on him; the king who blessed and aided his trip to Israel.

Naaman knew he would continue to accompany his king into the worship of his nation's god and he would bow down. But he promised his heart would not be in it, only love and respect for his king. Elisha saw Naaman's heart and blessed him on his way.

We cannot buy God's favor with fancy offerings or pious phrases. We can't even buy God's favor with sacrifices and excessive self denial. The prophet Micah spoke the word of the Lord to the people. The Lord does not require rivers of oil or the slaughter of herds of rams. The Lord requires that we love justice, do kindness and walk humbly with our God. Realize the promise of your baptism.