

Small Steps of Faithful Life

Naaman, the general of the armies of the King of Aram, came to Elisha, the man of God in Israel, to seek healing. And Elisha, the man of God, offered Naaman healing. And Elisha's offer angers Naaman, so that Naaman is about to leave in a huff, he's about to turn and go away mad, he is about to give up his chance for the health and wholeness that could come to him from God, and possibly even start a war between Aram and Israel—and all because Elisha says to him, “Go and wash in the Jordan seven times.”

That kind of anger seems like a very odd reaction from Naaman—until we begin to put this little exchange between Naaman and Elisha into its context. You see, in his context, Naaman was an important man, both in his own country and in the entire region. Naaman's excellent command of the army had given the king of Aram many victories. His name was respected and feared by all the peoples of the area. Naaman was pretty big stuff on the political and international scene.

So when Naaman comes to Israel to seek healing, he comes with all the trappings of an official state visit: he comes with a large retinue, with an entourage of servants and slaves; he comes with horses and chariots; he comes with an official letter from the King of Aram; he comes with great quantities of gold and silver and with ten sets of festal garments to present as a gift to the one who would heal him. Naaman comes prepared to show himself a mighty man by giving out the royal treatment.

But if Naaman comes with lots of gifts, he comes with lots of expectations, too: he's prepared to give the royal treatment, but he expects to *get* the royal treatment in return. That's how diplomacy often worked in the kingdoms of the ancient Near East: you'd give lavish gifts and a great show of pomp and circumstance in order to show how important and powerful you were, and to show that those around you would be wise to lavish gifts and compliments and pomp and circumstance on *you* in return.

That's certainly what Naaman expects when he is sent to see Elisha. But when Naaman gets to Elisha's house, Elisha doesn't even come out to see him. Elisha sends a messenger, an underling who tells him to wash in the Jordan seven times, and he will be healed. To Naaman, this advice seems terribly anticlimactic. Here he is, prepared to show Elisha great honor, and he expects Elisha to respond in kind: he expects Elisha to come out, and bow down, and call upon his God, and make an proper show of ritual and ceremonial honor, and heal Naaman on the spot. But *this*—this “go and wash in the Jordan seven times”—this was so ordinary, so mundane, so simple, so beneath him, so inappropriate to his dignity and his honor—well it's ridiculous, it's absurd, it's *insulting*, and Naaman would rather be cursed with his skin disease than stoop himself to do something so low.

And that's why Naaman is about to leave in anger, until his own servants say to him, “If the prophet had told you to do something difficult, something that showed off your dignity and power, you would have done it. What have you got to lose by doing something simple? Why not just give it a try?” So Naaman does: he goes to the Jordan, and washes seven times, and he is healed. Naaman had no idea what God could do through him, until he gave it a try.

What Naaman had to do was be willing to do something ordinary, so that the grace of God could shine through it in an extraordinary way. Washing in the Jordan *was* simple, and mundane, and ordinary—but it was precisely in that simple, mundane, ordinary act of faithful response, that Naaman could open himself up, could move beyond his own pride and self-importance, to be able to receive the extraordinary healing and presence and love that God did want to give him.

And that is the Good News of this story today, the Good News of this story for us: that *we* are called to ordinary acts of faith—ordinary acts where the extraordinary grace of God can suddenly shine through for us, and we can be surprised with healing and wholeness and love where we might not have expected it. The Good News for us is that it is often in the small steps of faithful life that God's will and God's work are most clearly accomplished in us.

And I think that is especially important for us to remember today, on this day when we hand out pledge packets, and each of us, in our families and for ourselves, each of us prays and ponders how we will give to support the ministry of Christ that happens through the works of Trinity Church. And pondering how we will support our ministries at this peculiar historical moment, this time of recession and financial anxiety, pondering our pledges *now* can feel kind of overwhelming. It is difficult to think about making a promise to give money to the church over the next year, when a lot of us aren't sure where our money will be in the next year, or in the next few months, or even in the next few *weeks*. It is difficult to think about expanding our church programs, about increasing our building maintenance reserve fund, about bringing a second priest to our staff, when we see businesses and agencies and churches all around us having to scale down and cut back and retrench. Rising up to the challenge of increasing our giving, responding to the call of expanding our stewardship, now, in the midst of a recession, might feel at first like something impossibly huge and heroic and risky and beyond the means of our ordinary abilities.

But the Good News is that it's often through the small, simple, ordinary steps of faithful life that God can do the most extraordinary things. What if we thought about expanding our *stewardship* through small, simple steps of faith? Maybe even small changes in ordinary habits can lead to extraordinary results in generosity and giving.

I had a friend in my last parish who really loved Starbucks coffee. People of Norwegian ancestry, I have found, tend to like their coffee strong, and my friend thought that Starbucks made their coffee good and strong, and his daily trip for a grande and a scone was an important part of regular routine. He sat down once and figured out that if he skipped Starbucks once a week, if he had coffee at home and a piece of toast once a week, he'd save about \$4; and if he multiplied that by 52 weeks in the year; and if he gave that to the church instead; then he could increase his pledge by more than \$200—\$200 that would go to mission and ministry that he really did care about more than he cared about coffee.

I knew another parishioner once, a realtor, who was striving to tithe, whose goal was to give 10% of his income to the work of God in the church. But he knew that just jumping up to 10% would be really hard on the family budget, it wouldn't be fair to their kids and their savings. So he decided to begin by tithing the commissions on his home sales—not his entire income, not his salary, not his commercial properties—but every time he sold a home, he'd take 10% right off the top of his proceeds, and he'd give that as a special gift to his church, above and beyond his regular modest pledge. By tithing those commissions he was able strengthen considerably the ministries of the church—especially the evangelism and outreach ministries that were his particular interest.

I even knew someone, a long time ago, who quit smoking cigarettes and switched to a pipe in order to increase his pledge. To be sure, he said that it was something he'd been wanting to do for some time, that switching to a pipe was a matter of preference and not some sort of heroic sacrifice. But what got him to finally make the change was that he knew his church needed an increase in pledges, and he counted up the cost of a pack a day cigarette habit, multiplied it by 365, and realized how much more good that money could do working through his church than just going up in smoke. He made a fairly simple, ordinary lifestyle change, and it resulted in an extraordinary change in his ability to give.

Time and time again, I've known people who have taken simple, ordinary steps of faith, and have seen God's generosity shine through them in extraordinary ways. I believe the same is true for us, here, at Trinity Church, in 2009, in the midst of a recession. Expanding our programs, taking care of our buildings, getting the full staff we need—it can all seem daunting, difficult, overwhelming, if we try to take it all at once. But the Good News is we don't have to take it all at once, the Good News is we walk with God step by step by step, and with God each small step of faith, each ordinary act of simple trust, something no more difficult for us than it was for Naaman to wash in the Jordan seven times—each ordinary act of faith can open up into an extraordinary occasion of wholeness and generosity and grace in God. So as you pick up your pledge packet today, as you give thought and prayer to your financial support of the ministries of Christ that take place through Trinity, I invite you to consider what small steps of faith in your giving might open up the way to wonderful gifts of God.

Like Naaman in the story, we have no idea what God can do through us, until step up and give it a try. Amen.