

“Bringing the Kingdom Near”
July 6, 2025
2 Kings 5:1-14; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

The relationship between power and humility is a theme that runs through the entire Bible. Over and over we come across stories about people who think they are powerful, or should be powerful, only to find themselves hitting a wall of personal or social defect that prevents them from moving on. The story of the general Naaman is one of these. We’re told he is Aram’s most successful general, a very powerful figure in their country. But he’s been struck with leprosy, a skin condition thought to be contagious and incurable. So, in spite of his great status in their country, Naaman was a social pariah.

In his home was a servant girl from Israel, an enslaved person brought there after a battle. She is, I assume, the least powerful person in that household. Yet, she offers a solution to the general for his condition. What I find so amazing about this story is how Naaman responds to this slave girl’s suggestion. He seems to accept it immediately. Since when do powerful generals and wealthy householders listen to the advice of slave girls? Or for that matter, since when does the king of a dominant country like Aram send gifts and a polite message to a lesser king, whom he’s defeated in battle, asking for his help?

Honestly, the only person in this story who behaves appropriately is the king of Israel, who thinks he’s being set up. That’s the way power is supposed to work in our world. When you’re approached by a stronger enemy for a favor, you know right away you can’t really say no. But in the world of the Bible, everything is different. When God’s kingdom comes near, all the relationships we take for granted between the powerful and the weak are turned on their heads. The powerful general Naaman is taking advice first from a slave girl, then from his own entourage of servants to follow the instructions of some obscure prophet he’s never heard of and doesn’t even meet.

That initial fit of rage from Naaman is completely understandable. If any of us went to a doctor and were only given a message from the receptionist without even an exam, we’d feel like we were mistreated. So, again, it’s kind of amazing that he listens to his servants. This man is not as arrogant as it seems like he should be. He’s entered God’s kingdom and discovered a new way to see the world. After his healing he tries to pay Elisha, but the prophet refuses. Naaman makes it clear he is now devoted to the God of Israel. Kind of makes you wonder what kind of general he’ll be in the future.

We don’t get to find out, but we can assume this kind of change leads to other changes as well. When the kingdom comes near and the dynamic between power and humility is reversed, so that power is diminished and humility is elevated, behavior is affected in profound ways.

The gospel of Jesus is an invitation to humility. When he sends out his followers in pairs across the countryside, he sends them in the humblest condition possible: no purse, no bag, no sandals. It’s a way of embodying humility. Jesus’ followers are called to lay aside any claims to

power or privilege and move in the world as though they are impoverished. That's how God's kingdom is brought near. It's brought near through humility not power.

That may be why so many find the gospel of Jesus so dangerous. Naaman expected some great flourish of power from Elisha; he wanted the heavens to open up and the prophet to command the elements. Instead he was told to wash himself in some tiny creek in Israel called the Jordan River. If there was no display of power, then it made no sense to the great general. The gospel is understood the same way. If it isn't imposed through force and all its resisters vanquished, then how can it possibly be authoritative? That's why there are so many in our country right now who want to impose their understanding of the faith on all the rest of us. What they're offering isn't God's kingdom.

Jesus sends his followers out to take healing and hope to people whose lives were filled with misery. He sends them to spread a message of peace that's expressed through humility even though they seem to command great power. Jesus rejects coercion and insists on the power of persuasion through compassion and empathy. That's not how the world normally operates. We're attracted to power; we like imposing our will on others. We have this strange belief that if everyone just thinks the same way, we'd all be at peace. Jesus doesn't claim that. He doesn't tell his followers to go out and force everyone they meet to accept his teachings.

Now, I will admit the lectionary skips a little portion of that passage from Luke that sounds pretty harsh. There's a consequence for those towns that refuse to accept the disciples. The very next sentence after the disciples shake the dust of a town off their feet is: "I tell you on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town." That sounds pretty vindictive. And maybe it's an example of an overzealous copyist who wanted to insert a little threat, but it could also be a way of saying when we reject God's kingdom what we're left with is unsustainable.

Societies that allow their poor and vulnerable to suffer without any relief will collapse under the weight of that suffering. When we withhold care by cutting people off from access to programs like Medicaid and SNAP, we're creating an intolerable condition. So, legislation that benefits the wealthiest at the expense of the poorest and most vulnerable is a rejection of God's kingdom. *[And by the way, that gulag in the Everglades—that place with a funny little name and its own merch, like it's an amusement park, is an obscenity. It is beneath the dignity of our country to treat immigrants in that way, in ways we would condemn any other nation for treating their incarcerated.]* Jesus shakes the dust of such a place off his feet. That's not punishment; it's just a consequence of choosing power over humility.

The gospel of Jesus calls us to something more. It calls us to embrace a life of hope and healing and to extend that healing and hope to a world longing for relief. When someone as powerful as Naaman can be brought to humility, then any of us can. Because we're all in need of healing for what cuts us off from relationships of love and compassion. Like Naaman we're all looking for an answer to our condition; we're all looking for God's kingdom. What Jesus says is we carry that kingdom with us when we go into the world with humility. We cause Satan to fall from the sky like lightening when we offer the world compassion, empathy and peace.

One thing about Luke's story that can be overlooked is Jesus doesn't send out the inner circle of "special" disciples. He sends out seventy people apparently at random. Which is to say he's not checking their credentials first. Every one of us is qualified to answer Jesus' call. He sends every one of us out to reveal God's kingdom in the world. We don't need special training or knowledge. All it takes is a willingness to put aside power and walk humbly in the world. When we walk with humility we can see others in need around us and respond in ways that are meaningful and can lead to change.

Bringing the kingdom near is how we change the world. It takes time and patience and persistence. We have to be willing to accept rejection with grace and offer hope with confidence. The world needs what we have to offer; it needs the peace we bring. Jesus is calling every one of us to go out and give his love to the world, to give healing, hope and peace and bring God's kingdom near.

Amen