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Simple Things
2 Kings 5: 1-14
August 4, 2013

This is our last week with Elijah and Elisha. Over the summer, we've discussed why idolatry is a big deal in the Hebrew scriptures: When you turn away from God you start turning into the unjust empire of Egypt. We discussed stories of abundance and stories of rescue, and reminded ourselves that this is not just how God was but how God is: God provides in abundance and God hears our cries. And we've seen that Elijah and Elisha are carrying on the tradition of Moses and the way of life he represents and that Jesus stands on the tradition of all of them.

Today's story of Naaman's healing begins with loving, compassionate action when there's no reason for it. As Naaman's army raids Israel, they take a young girl captive from the land of Israel and enslave her. The girl becomes the slave of Naaman's wife. When this slave girl discovers that her owner has leprosy, she tells Naaman's wife how Naaman can be cured. "He needs to visit Elisha," she says, "a prophet back in Israel." This girl doesn't have to say a word. She has every reason to be angry and bitter and to want nothing but bad things for Naaman, but she chooses love instead. Without loving action when there is no reason for it, Naaman wouldn't be healed. Today's story teaches that sometimes God's healing and saving work depend on people offering love and compassion when they have every reason not to.

There's nothing in the story that suggests that Naaman says thank you to the girl or shows any gratitude. The girl selflessly gives to Naaman and he prepares to go see Elisha. Naaman leaves with 10 talents of silver, 6000 shekels of gold and 10 sets of garments. I have no idea what the garments are like but I'm guessing they are fancy. This is why. One talent was 75.6 lbs. 756 lbs of silver is worth about

\$90,000 today. A shekel of gold was 11.4 grams, meaning one shekel of gold is worth about \$480 today. 6000 shekels of gold is worth about \$2.8 million. Apparently health care was expensive in Ancient Israel too.

Naaman travels with excessive wealth, and horses and chariots (which means military might) and he halts outside of Elisha's door. Naaman is ready to buy Elisha's healing or to force Elisha to heal him. And Elisha won't see him. Elisha sends a messenger to tell Naaman to wash in the Jordan seven times and he will be healed. Naaman is offended. He is wealthy and powerful, he at least wants to see the whites of the eyes of the physician. And he's skeptical of the prescription, there are many rivers better than the Jordan.

One of Naaman's servants tries to calm him down. "If you had been given something difficult to do, you would have done it. This is simple. Why not give it a try?" Naaman humbles himself, surrenders to the instruction. I don't think he trusts it. I think he says "Fine, I'll do it, then let's get out of here." Naaman bathes in the Jordan seven times and is healed.

One thing this story is saying is that our encounters with God's healing love are often through simple things, through humbling things. Offering love and receiving love when it isn't deserved, heals. Surrendering to the good news of God's love for the world and for us heals. Archbishop Desmond Tutu says he has one sermon, "God loves you." What happens when we just try it out, trust that we are always held in love and we trust that we are always precious and valuable and gifted. As we discover this is true, healing will happen. Prayer heals. We'll talk more about this next week as Jesus teaches the disciples to pray in Luke. Prayer is the realm of mystery. No one should be comfortable making many claims here. But something healing happens when we humble ourselves and cry out to God. Something happens when we cry out on behalf of a neighbor. Something happens when we give thanks and try to stay connected to Sacred Presence. Simple and humbling pathways to an encounter with God's healing: love when it isn't deserved, surrendering to the good news that we are always held in love, and seeking to join our heart with God's heart in prayer.

At our house we've been reading *The Tale of Despereaux* by Minneapolis's own Kate DiCamillo. Have any of you read the book or seen the movie? Despereaux is a mouse; he's the runt of the litter and he's strange. He learns how to read, and he falls in love with a human princess, and he talks to human beings. This is forbidden for a mouse. The mouse council must make an example of Despereaux and they sentence him to the dungeon where he will most likely die. And the saddest part is that Despereaux's father is a member of the council and he does not defend his son. The book takes many twists and turns, and then there is a scene where Despereaux comes face to face with the council and his father once again. Here's the passage:

"Despereaux," said Lester (Despereaux's father). "Son. You have come back!"

Despereaux looked at his father and saw an old mouse whose fur was shot through with gray. How could that be? Despereaux had been gone only a few days, but his father seemed to have aged many years in his absence.

"Son," said Lester, his whiskers trembling, "I dream about you every night. I dream about beating the drum that sent you to your death. I was wrong. What I did was wrong."

"No!" called the Most Very Honored Head Mouse. "No!"

"I've destroyed it," said Lester. "I've destroyed the drum. Will you forgive me?" He clasped his front paws together and looked at his son.

"No!" shouted the head mouse again. "No. Do not ask Despereaux to forgive you Lester. You did as you should. You did what was best for the mouse community."

Lester ignored the Head Mouse. "Son," he said. "Please."

Despereaux looked at his father, at his gray-streaked fur and trembling whiskers and his front paws clasped together in front of his heart, and he felt suddenly as if his own heart would break in two. His father looked so small, so sad.

"Forgive me," said Lester again.

Forgiveness, reader, is, I think, something very much like hope and love, a powerful, wonderful thing.

And a ridiculous thing, too.

Isn't it ridiculous, after all, to think that a son could forgive his father for beating the drum that sent him to his death?

But still, here are the words Despereaux Tilling spoke to his father. He said, "I forgive you, Pa."

And he said those words because he sensed that it was the only way to save his own heart, to stop it from breaking in two. Despereaux, reader, spoke those words to save himself.

Despereaux stood before the Mouse Council, and he realized that he was a different mouse than he had been the last time he faced them. He had been to the dungeon and back up out of it. He knew things they would never know; what they thought of him, he realized, did not matter, not at all.

And so, without saying another word, Despereaux turned and left the room. Lester Tilling had turned his head away from the other members of the Mouse Council; he was trying to hide his tears.

He was crying, reader, because he had been forgiven.

In this part of the story of Despereaux we see love given when it isn't deserved and we see Despereaux's father humbling himself, and we see love that heals. Perhaps Namaan's slave girl offered love and compassion to keep her own heart from breaking in two. May we encounter God's saving and healing love as we do some simple, humbling things: give and receive love that isn't deserved, surrender to the good news that we are held in love, and join our heart with God's heart in prayer. Amen.