

“A QUERULOUS HEALING  
2 KINGS 5:1-14

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University Church of Chicago  
Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

*When he joined the company, he was fresh from an M.B.A. program at Northwestern, idealistic, energetic, full of ideas and hope. This was in the days before many people achieved a master's degree in business administration. But he wanted to learn more, to be effective in his chosen field. So, he waited for the right company, the right opportunity to use his skills.*

*It's a good company, a huge conglomerate that treats its employees well, provides good benefits and rewards hard work. However, it seemed to him the company wasn't committed to initiative or new ideas. And the emphasis was always on the bottom line, on profits instead of people, on market share rather than developing the best products. He loathed that part of American big business.*

*But the young man knew he had talent, and he knew nobody would work harder or be more loyal. As he progressed upward through the company's hierarchy of management, he kept telling himself, "I don't want to become a greedy, driven, hard-nosed person who has lost the human touch, but in order to get to the point where I can change things, I must pretend to be the opposite of who I really am. So I will compromise my ideals, my values until I can reach a level where I can initiate change."*

*Although he still thinks of himself in those same idealistic, even moralistic terms, my friend is now in his early fifties and has achieved the kind of management position he had always aspired to. He's making more money and has a richer life than he had ever imagined he would. Now's the time to throw off his pretense and reveal himself to his peers. He has worked his way into a level of leadership that can now give him the freedom to make the much-needed changes, to do something significant about the system under which he has chafed for over two decades.*

*But, alas, my friend's pretense has become reality. He has lived for so long as one of the good old boys, has taken on their coloration to such an extent that he cannot change and cannot work to turn his company around. The younger M.B.A.'s view him as just another out-of-touch, greedy, self-serving company vice-president who is collecting all the money and benefits and bonuses he possibly can until he takes early retirement and moves to Sun City.*

Look around you and count the number of people who are wearing glasses—or the vain ones who hide their myopia by wearing contact lenses. When I played baseball, my vision was counted as 20/5, far better than the average 20/20. I could see pitches better than anybody else on my team. Then, years later, I began to hold documents at arms' length in order to read them. I occasionally had to wear glasses to read, then I came to the

point where I couldn't read without glasses, and now I have come to the point where I have to wear bi-focals, glasses that help me read but also glasses that help me see clearly. Many of you are in the same predicament. But consider a time when such reading and seeing aids were not available, not even invented. Progressive blindness without treatment was a fact of life in Biblical times, and many diseases which have caused blindness have now been eradicated or cured by medical science. So the Bible is very concerned about blindness, about those who cannot see—and the writers of the Bible extrapolate from that a fact we all know about ourselves and others: we suffer from spiritual blindness.

My friend in the little parable with which I began the sermon suffers from a kind of blindness about himself and his circumstances. He has become the man he pretended to be for many years and now cannot see himself as he really is. In this story of the healing of Naaman, the first thing we have is two kings who cannot see themselves as they are, who are blinded by their own power. “Am I God, to give death or life?” the king of Israel asks when he receives the letter from the king of Aram. The king of Israel refuses to see that the providence and healing reach of Israel's God is not limited to the people of the Covenant.

The main actor in the story is God, the One who demonstrates God's continuing providence for individuals and nations and foreshadows the establishment of baptism as one of two visible signs pointing to God's invisible truth. Elisha the prophet plays a small part in this drama. He resorts to what Kierkegaard would later call “an indirect method.” When Elisha sends only a messenger to Naaman with instructions for how he can be healed, Naaman rails at what he perceives to be an insult. Naaman then takes umbrage at Elisha's choice of the river in which he should wash, claiming that the rivers of his own nation are superior. On both levels, Naaman's pride prevents his perceiving God's providential acts conveyed by Elisha, Elisha's messenger and Naaman's own servants.

*She was walking south on Dearborn Street one day from the Newberry Library. It had been a particularly difficult morning, and she had her head down as she brooded on her problems. The winter snow had melted and the sun was shining. Just north of Delaware Place, she caught the gleam of a coin on the sidewalk near a parking box. It was a quarter. She bent down and picked it up. Then she noticed a dime and over there a nickel. She began to look more carefully at the ground. Apparently, motorists in their haste to feed the boxes and get on their way had dropped coins all along the street.*

*She didn't need the money. That wasn't the point. “I'm not a bag lady,” she told herself. Nonetheless, she was intrigued by the multitude of coins scattered near various parking meters. As she walked toward the Loop, she kept spying first a quarter, then another, nickels, dimes, pennies. The coins were in front of Walgreens revolving doors and restaurant entrances. By the time she reached Daley Plaza, she had picked up \$4.73, which she put in a special little coin purse until she could return to her apartment and put the money in a jar.*

*She walked home going north on Clark Street where the new parking kiosks were ubiquitous. And, true to her previous experience, the ground near the meters was littered with abandoned coins. By the time she arrived at her condo in Lincoln Park, she had picked up another \$3.35. "Clark is not as prosperous as Dearborn," she mused.*

*The forays onto streets with parking boxes became an adventure, then a habit, finally an obsession. Her coin jar soon overflowed, and she had to get another, then another. The denizens of the North Loop and Lincoln Park began to call her "the coin woman" or "the parking kiosk maven," but she was unaware of their sobriquets. The worst aspect of her obsession with small change was that she became stooped, always walked with her head down and after a while lost sight of other people. She kept running into people and walls; she tripped over small obstacles and fell into holes. She lost sight of her original interest in lost coins and became the very person she was initially afraid of becoming: a stooped old bag lady.*

In a culture of relativism, the contrast between belief and unbelief is very stark indeed. We are fond of saying about some misguided people in the faith, "Well, you have to admit that she's sincere." By simplifying the Gospel to a feeling of sincerity, we ratify whatever one does or says. The Gospel is not something we choose to believe if it "meets our needs." Rather there is a conflict between faith and unbelief, light and darkness. Not everyone who sees Jesus or hears about him believes, but only those into whose hearts the light of Christ shines.

We live in the relativities of the world, but an absolute demand is put upon us who are followers of Christ. Kierkegaard compared our lives to the situation of diplomats who "acquire the self-control necessary to hold fast to the great plan, and at the same time make conversation with the ladies, play billiards, and whatever else you like."

On this national holiday, consider two of the most accomplished diplomats in American history as examples of Kierkegaard's analogy: Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. Both of those very intelligent but flawed human beings went to France as envoys for America. Both were highly sexed, loved the good life and indulged themselves in the royal courts. But they kept their eye on the goal, they gave their ultimate energy to the task to which they had been assigned.

Preacher, teacher, construction worker, banker, manager, developer, government worker—we live under the mandate of God's truth. Behind every moment of flashing, effortless truth lie hours and days of inspired study and work. "Let us not forget," wrote Kierkegaard, "that in the schoolroom...it was the mediocre pupil who came running ten minutes after the task had been set, claiming to have finished."

*There was a certain man who moved into a cottage equipped with a stove and simple furnishings. As the sharp edge of winter cut across the landscape, the cottage grew cold as did its occupant. He went out back and pulled a few boards from the house to kindle a fire. The fire was warm, but the house seemed as cold as before. More boards came off for a larger fire to warm the now even colder house, which in turn required an even*

*larger fire, demanding more boards. In a few days the man cursed the weather, cursed the house, cursed the stove and moved away.*

In his pride and recalcitrance Naaman is like those people who say, “I did not get anything out of that sermon—it must be the preacher’s fault.” Now, God knows that preachers sometimes fail to preach—often fail to preach—God’s word. But each of us, pastor or layperson, preacher or listener, is accountable for the message. Even the best sermon will not get through to someone who refuses to receive the word.

A sermon is not a performance of a preacher before an audience. Rather, it’s a contract, a mutual searching for faith. If the worshipers think of their role as passive, waiting to be entertained or, worst of all, judging the worth of both the preacher and the sermon, then even St. Paul can’t preach the Word. Some people in this congregation—choir members, ushers, those in a hurry to get out on time—don’t get anything from the sermon because they have too much else on their mind and they can’t worship God because they are worshipping the details, the mechanics. The light shines but they remain in the dark.

*He wanted desperately to be loved. He grew up in a pious, Midwestern home in which love was a commodity given only if you behaved yourself, only if you lived according to the rules. While love was talked about, preached about in sepulchered tones virtually every Sunday morning in the little, rural Methodist church of his childhood, it was rarely practiced either in his home or his church. When he came to the city to escape the closeness, the intertwined relationships and the gossiping of a small Indiana town, he reveled in the urban anonymity, in his first opportunity to let go and explore new ways to find love.*

*Because he had money and a decent charm and was attentive, he found women who would love him, or at least say they did. But each affair, each relationship diminished him; they did not enlarge his vision, his dreams, his aspirations. As each affair broke up, he asked, “Is this all there is?”*

*Then, one day he found the perfect woman, the fulfillment of his dreams, his fantasies become real. They dined and danced and traveled together. It was perfect! Except for two caveats she made: she would never marry him and he had to give up his faith if they were going to find love. She was not an atheist, not a bad person, certainly not immoral. But she hated organized religion and would have nothing to do with it. And she was afraid of commitment to one person. So, he quit going to church, and after a while forgot how to pray and put his Bible away in a trunk in the apartment building’s storage space. There was still the longing in his heart: for home and church and family and stability. But since he found at long last the perfect woman of his dreams, he was willing to sacrifice his religion and his family.*

“There is no lack of communication in a Christian land,” said Kierkegaard. “Something else is lacking, and this is a something which one person cannot directly communicate to the other.”

God's light breaks through our darkness, and the glory of the light shines in our lives.  
May we who have been blind have our eyes opened.