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A President's Prayer, A Prophet's Mercy

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Paul Escamilla
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2 Kings 5:1-14

In Palestine, sometime around the 8th century B.C., an Israeli girl is captured by soldiers from Aram, present day Syria, during one of many ongoing battles and skirmishes between those two countries. She is pressed into service as the handmaid of the wife of the top commander for the Aram army. The commander, Naaman, suffers from leprosy, and when the servant girl learns of this, for reasons we are not given, she volunteers to her mistress that there is a prophet in her home country with powers for healing.

Her mistress informs her husband, Naaman, of this promising possibility. Naaman then promptly requests leave of his post from the king and proceeds to travel to Israel to inquire of Israel's king about a possible cure.

Naaman eventually finds his way to the prophet, Elisha, who instructs the commander in the required healing ritual: to wash seven times in the Jordan River. This may seem like a strange way for a prophet with healing powers to cure leprosy, but you've heard of stranger remedies: wet socks for sniffles, aspirin for dandruff, tea for smelly feet, chocolate for coughs. (One can easily understand the popularity of that last one!)

The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, actually thought of himself as a lay practitioner of the healing arts. He was approached once by a man losing his hair to baldness. Wesley prescribed garlic, instructing the man to rub it into his scalp three times a day. Some weeks later Wesley encountered the man, asking him, "Has the garlic remedy cured your balding problem?" "No," the man replied, "but it's given me a lot of time to myself."

The commander Naaman protests Elisha's prescription, as you or I might. Think of the ordeal, the embarrassment, the downright humiliation of a high-ranking officer stripping down on enemy soil and bathing seven times in a public river. He initially refuses the treatment, but level heads prevail—in this case, his own servants (the second time servants are the saving grace in this story). They manage to talk this temperamental army commander down from his high horse, whereupon Naaman agrees to do as he has been instructed, is healed, expresses his profound gratitude to Elisha, and returns to his home country.

It's a curious but inspiring and heartening story: the generosity of a servant girl toward her captors, the humiliation of an enemy army commander desperate for healing, the mercy of a prophet willing to grant this healing gift to such an adversary.

Centuries later, Jesus told this story in a sermon in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. In response, the congregation drove him out of the synagogue and attempted to run him off a cliff.

Why? Because every community of faith, like every individual and city and nation, carries in each pocket a different coin for currency: one is the coin of mercy, the other, of fear. Fear of being left out. Fear of being short-changed. Fear that the mercy of God is a zero-sum reality, and if you get more than I, or get it first, there may not be enough left for me.

A story in which an enemy commander is healed by an Israeli prophet could have inspired mercy on that day in the synagogue in Nazareth; instead, it went the other way. Never mind the fact it was from their own Bible. It was an affront, a threat; and fear and anger resulted.

It happens so easily—going to that second pocket. Fear in all its forms: retribution, withholding, punishment, vindication—in popular culture these are popular methods for addressing a wrong or threat. These are what often are dished out at the movies, on TV and radio, in our children’s video games, and on a bad day, in the halls of government, business, or any other workplace.

It is no wonder that the man who would be our country’s first president, a person of prayer, when as the commander of the Continental Army he bent his knee on June 8, 1783 at his army headquarters in Newburgh, New York to pray for his young nation, prayed first and foremost for the gift of mercy:

I now make it my earnest prayer, that God would have the United States in his holy protection . . . and would be pleased to dispose us all to do Justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with that Charity, humility and pacific temper of mind, which were the Characteristics of the Divine Author of our blessed Religion, and without which we can never hope to be a happy nation. Amen.

To do justice, to love mercy. Washington is clearly echoing words we recognize as belonging to the prophet Micah. He surely understood that only when mercy is woven into our lives, our communities, our national identity and international relations can we live as decent human beings within a decent society.

Those two coins, fear and mercy, are in every pocket every day. We always have the choice to reach for either of the two. You may yourself be dealing directly right now with a situation at home or work that’s having you reach in one pocket or the other. Which coin will you draw from your pocket? As people of faith, and as Americans, too, the official coin of the realm is mercy. This fact is what leaves me most humbled as a Christian, and most proud to be an American.

In 1993 Greg Mortenson failed in his attempt to climb K2, and was separated from his team in the process. He wandered, lost and endangered, into the mountain village of Korphe in Northern Pakistan where he was nursed back to health. In gratitude for this rescue, he made what might be considered a rather cavalier promise to the chief of the village: that he would return to build a school. Three years later, he did return, and within another year that school had been built. One thing led to another, and Mortenson started a nonprofit group called the Central Asia Institute that has since built 78 schools for 33,000 Pakistani and Afghan children. (The beginning of this story is told in *Three Cups of Tea*.)

This has all proven possible through the remarkable generosity of American donors—philanthropists, ordinary people, children, high school students. (This spring, Anna’s high school in Richardson raised around \$25,000 to build a school in Afghanistan or Pakistan through the Central Asia Institute.) In the wake of this overwhelming surge of support and generosity from his home country, Mortenson writes, in his later book, *Stones Into Schools*, “Here, then, is the source of my wonder and confusion. Why do so many Americans seem to care so deeply about people who live in a place that is so far away? Despite everything that has happened, how can our anger and our fear be transcended so consistently by our decency?”

What the president prayed for, we have experienced so often and in so many expressions in our time: mercy, charity, humility . . . the desire and determination for justice in our land, and abroad.

Why? Because we carry in our pocket two coins for currency: one is fear, but the other is of far greater value in trade: mercy. It grows as it is given; it expands beyond its reach; it returns manifold to the one who offers it. How did Jesus put it? “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Luke 6:38).

Maybe that’s what Shakespeare meant—or Portia, rather, when he was addressing Shylock in “The Merchant of Venice.” To paraphrase, “The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath and is twice blest—it blesseth the one who gives and the one who takes.”

Mercy is the coin of the realm for people of faith, and for this nation by which, Wesley once observed, “God has so strangely made them free.” It is a coin that multiplies itself—not like loaves and fishes, or even bread and wine.