

Loving When Difficult

Galatians 6:1-10; II Kings 5:1-14

I loved Sunday School as a child. I loved the stories, the activities and the challenge games provided to help me learn lessons and scripture passages. Since my father pastored generally small churches, often I was the only pupil in my class which was fine with me because that meant I had time to ask my 1001 questions and I think back now with much gratitude to those gentle people who gave of their time and patience to me. They were laying a foundation of understanding of biblical precepts that serves me to this day.

One of my favorite stories in the Old Testament was the one of Naaman and the little servant girl that was read this morning. I was delighted to see it as my given passage from the lectionary for today. Everyone wants to find a place where they fit into a story and for me as a young girl, the little slave girl was my hero. I felt for her since she was very young and had been taken from her home and family by a marauding army to a foreign land where everything was different and became a slave in the household of the army commander. We are not told any of the circumstances of her life other than she was a slave and served the commander's wife. We don't know how she was treated but we do know she was a slave, property, and was not free to live her own life. Nonetheless, she remained kindhearted and compassionate even towards the person who was her captor.

Naaman had leprosy and apparently had been suffering with it for some time. We are not told how severe a case it was at that time, though any case would eventually become a death sentence. We do know though that it was not hindering him from continuing his command of the army for the King of Syria who held a great regard for him. Knowing something of the severity of this disease, we are told that the little servant girl had a conversation with her mistress about Naaman. She wished that he could see the prophet in her own country of Israel because she knew that he could heal him. We assume that she meant Elisha though he is not named here but was the prophet from her home region of Samaria and had done many great miracles for God. She was sure that healing Naaman was something that he could do.

Apparently, when Naaman heard of this from his wife, he was very motivated to act upon the child's words given evidence that his disease was worsening. He immediately told his King of Aram who wrote a letter of introduction to the King of Israel and sent Naaman on his way laden down with gold, silver and fine cloth as gifts to pay for the healing. The King of Israel was frightened almost to death when he received Naaman bearing the letter thinking that it was a rouse to incite another war and break the fragile truce that was in place. He knew HE couldn't cure the man and was a bit unsure who to send him to. (Remember, Elisha was not the only prophet in the land of Israel, just the one God chose to speak through in this instance.) Some of the court priests heard of

what was happening and sent word to let Elisha know what was going on. Elisha quickly responded to the king telling him to have Naaman come to him. The King gladly sent Naaman away letting him become someone else's problem. Upon arrival at Elisha's house, Elisha sent word out to Naaman through a messenger that if he wanted to be healed, all he had to do was to go wash himself seven times in the Jordan River and he would be healed of the disease.

Naaman was incensed!! The nerve of this prophet. Does he not know who he is dealing with? He should have come to me and done some grand incantation calling upon his God and heal me as I stand right here in front of him. Asking me to go and wash in the Jordan is absolutely crazy! If I wanted to wash in a river, there are wonderful rivers aplenty in Syria that I could wash in. To this point, Naaman was correct. The Jordan River was always a muddy river and due to the arid nature of the region, it often was little better than a series of mudholes so being asked to wash in that did seem a bit far fetched. Yet, that was what the messenger told him to do. Naaman wasn't having any of it and turned around to leave and head home fuming.

It was here that his servants stepped in and asked Naaman the hard question, v 12 "If the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, "Wash, and be clean?"

It seems that their point was well taken for Naaman did indeed go down and wash in that mudhole and on the 7th time, he emerged healed with skin as that of a young boy. While the passage read didn't include it, we are told that he came out of the water healed of his pride as well. He found that this God was the one true God and immediately became a believer and returned to Elisha to thank him and tell him that he would forever be a follower of God and he promised to tell everyone in his land what God had done for him.

You also heard read moments ago the passage from Galatians in which Paul writes about how we are to treat others. These two passages are separated by about 1000+ years and yet they hold many similarities. The healing of Naaman happened only due to oppressed, enslaved people of faith acting on behalf of the good of others, specifically the person to whom they owed their enslavement. It would have been so easy for this little slave girl to have kept her knowledge of Elisha's miracles to herself laughing inwardly at the pain and suffering of Naaman. What should she care if the person who stole her away from her family for a life of servitude suffered endlessly? He deserved it, didn't he? His servants traveling along with him could have also remained silent and followed him blithely back to Syria listening to his complaints and anger at the insulting way he felt he had been treated? With his close relationship to the King, this could have also escalated into some kind of military skirmish or war even, with lives lost and more suffering imposed upon others. But, none of those things happened. Instead, people under very difficult circumstances, showed kindness and compassion to people who they may have thought didn't deserve it, but they offered it nonetheless...and the outcome changed people's lives.

The Galatians passage was written for the people within the young church in Galatia as they were beginning to have to deal with members of their fellowship not being perfect. This is news to all of us, right? All people in a church are perfect and there are never any disagreements or problems, right? Well, these young Christians were having issues with people who had joined their church and fellowship and left behind their old sinful ways only to find that, on occasion they would return to indulge again in old habits, attitudes and rituals. As a result, the church members were left to ask themselves if they should let “those sinners” back into the fellowship. In this and other passages, Paul tries to teach them that the church is indeed a place for sinners, backsliders and the like...because that is all of us. None of us are perfect and we all fall short of the glory of God. Here Paul guides them to restore a person back into the fellowship with gentleness helping them through the trying times because we are to help carry others burdens. If we find ourselves feeling a bit superior because we didn't fall into “that” sin, Paul is quick to remind us that we would be fooling ourselves if we think that we are better. Reality is that tomorrow, it may be us who need assistance and forgiveness to be restored into the fellowship.

Paul's lesson is about personal responsibility in our individual and in our corporate faith. We each have a job to do and responsibility to share. We are to continue to do our share, not giving up when difficult but rather working for the good of all people as long as we can do so.

All this talk of personal responsibility calls to mind for me the process of Alcoholics Anonymous and most of the other 12-step programs. In them, the recovering person is taught personal responsibility and their actions have consequences. As a part of the healing and recovery process, they work back through the days of their involvement and if they have wronged or hurt someone, they are to “make amends” to that person complete with apology and if needed, restitution as best they can. They are to try to make right again the relationship or situation that they wronged. If you take time to read all of Galatians and Paul's other letters to young churches, you will find that much of the same lessons are taught. We need to own up to our own portion of responsibility in situations and do our part to make it whole again.

But in this passage, Paul is speaking to the church and how it responds to difficult situations among its members. We are to find gentle ways in which to restore them. Notice that it doesn't say, “once the person has repented” or “when they have apologized”. It is from the perspective that the church is aware of a problematic situation and begins collectively to try to resolve it with gentleness even before apologies or repentance is offered. From the previous chapter and from the way the phrasing has been written, there is the implication that forgiveness of the person has already happened as the effort to reconcile them begins. But not only does the church have collective responsibility, Each member's responsibility is to forgive and try to reconcile by helping them to carry the burden because when the burden is shared, the load is lighter for all.

I want to talk a moment about forgiveness. This seems to be a difficult concept for today's society. In our culture, we seem to be taught that forgiveness is possibly offered, not assuredly, when someone who hurts or wrongs us repents and asks for forgiveness. That may be the world's view point, but that is not scriptural. If we have been wronged then Forgiveness is what we do; repentance is what they do. Forgiveness is something we offer to ourselves as much as we offer it to another person who has wronged us. The person who wronged us may never acknowledge the wrong and may never ask for forgiveness. Honestly, sometimes, things are done inadvertently and possibly the meaning is misunderstood by us and the relationship is damaged. Forgiveness is realizing that we have no control over what another person may think or feel. We are responsible for how we react to it. So forgiving is something WE do because bitterness can literally eat us up inside causing much damage to us emotionally and physically and the person for whom we are bitter may never even know it. So, forgiving others who have wronged us is something we do, for ourselves, AND because it is God's plan for our lives. God knows we cannot be joyful when filled with bitterness so he taught us to pray and release it. We pray each Sunday "Father forgive us our trespasses, debts, sins, as we forgive those who trespass, sinned, against us. Do notice this is an equilateral equation. We pray to be forgiven of our sins and debts as much (or as little) as we forgive others who sin against us. We should be careful praying that prayer.

Something that was helpful to me was learning where the term forgiveness came from while I was in seminary. In both the old and new testament, when the word forgiveness is used, it is coming from the banking industry of the day. Picture if you will a person who takes out a loan from a bank and then doesn't pay it back. Forgiveness is when the bank decides that it is better to just write it off and not pursue the debt – they forgive the debt. This would be much like today's bankruptcy. But it doesn't say that there is no memory of the offense. Also note that the borrower cannot return to bank to get another loan because as a part of the forgiveness/bankruptcy, their credit is shot and they must spend time working on building their credit back up. The same is true with forgiving in relationships. It is our responsibility to forgive people in order for us to move forward personally, and to in gentleness try to restore them back into the fellowship. When we have been hurt or wounded, it is hard to return to the same relationship so don't expect to do so immediately. It takes time to rebuild that relationship and the trust that was lost. When WE wrong someone, if we are repentant and remorseful, it will still take time for that relationship to be mended, for our credit to be built back up, and it takes willingness and work.

**I know that in our hearts and bodies we carry many misunderstandings, many hurt feelings, much anger, and lots of resentment has dug itself into the mix. For this or any church to become healthy, for any single person to be emotionally and spiritually healthy, forgiveness has to be the daily, if not momentary, mantra for all of us. It is a process to change our own hearts and minds and we start by saying to God I forgive _____ and you fill in the blank. You may have many things to forgive if you have been carrying around hurt and anger toward others. You may have to unpack and

separate numerous things in order to get to the bottom, forgiving each one, each situation and each person until you get there. But you can do it and let go of that pain so that you can begin to heal. It becomes much easier to act lovingly toward others and improve relationships when we aren't carrying so much anger and resentment ourselves.

The little servant girl and the traveling servants certainly had much to forgive and they must have done so or were constantly doing so for their actions were those of love and kindness and compassion even though they had been severely wronged. They give us great examples of how to be loving in difficult situations.

Just like Naaman, we cannot expect some big incantation or ritual dance made over us to heal our hearts and our church. It will happen when we are willing to do something as simple as to wash ourselves in God's healing river and say aloud 7 times, I forgive_____ and name it.

And, then, we will work together for the good of all people.

By Susan Burgess-Parrish, for July 7, 2019