

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost; October 13, 2024

2 Kings 5:14-27

“The Rest of the Story”

So [Na’aman] went down and dipped in the Jordan seven times, just as the man of God had said. Then his flesh was restored like the flesh of a small child, and he was clean. Then he and his whole escort went back to the man of God. He stood in front of Elisha and said, “To be sure, now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel. Now accept a gift from your servant.”

But Elisha said, “As surely as the LORD lives, in whose presence I stand, I will not take anything.” Even though Na’aman urged him to accept something, he refused.

Then Na’aman said, “If you do not want anything, please give me, your servant, as much dirt as two donkeys can carry, for your servant will never again burn incense or sacrifice to other gods, but only to the LORD. But may the LORD forgive your servant this one thing: When my master goes into the house of Rimmon to bow down there and he supports himself on my arm, then I too have to bow down in the house of Rimmon. When I bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the LORD forgive your servant this one thing.”

Then Elisha said to him, “Go in peace.”

When Na’aman had gone some distance from him, Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, said, “My master was too easy on this Aramean, Na’aman, when he did not accept anything that he brought. As surely as the LORD lives, I will run after him and get something from him.”

So Gehazi chased after Na’aman. When Na’aman saw him running after him, he got down from his chariot to meet him. He said, “Is everything all right?”

Then Gehazi said, “Yes, everything is all right. My master sent me to say, ‘Look, just now two young men from the hill country of Ephraim, from the sons of the prophets, have come to me. Please give them a talent of silver and two sets of clothing.’”

Na’aman said, “Certainly! Take two talents!” He urged Gehazi and tied up two talents of silver in two bags and two sets of clothing. Then Na’aman gave them to his two servants, and they carried them ahead of Gehazi. When he came to the hill, he took the gifts from them. Then he hid them in the house and sent the men back, so they left. Then he went in and attended to his master.

Elisha said to him, “Where were you, Gehazi?”

Gehazi said, “Your servant didn’t go anywhere.”

Then Elisha said to him, “Didn’t my heart go along when the man got down from his chariot to meet you? Is this the time to take silver, or to accept clothing or olive groves or vineyards or sheep or cattle or male or female servants? Na’aman’s leprosy will cling to you and to your descendants forever.” Then Gehazi went out from his presence, leprous like snow.

When I was growing up, one of my heroes was Kirby Puckett. He was a baseball player, a centerfielder on the Minnesota Twins. His life was a great story. He overcame poverty and violence on Chicago's Southside to make it to the major leagues and play 12 seasons for the Twins. Despite being undersized at 5'8", he had five seasons with at least 200 hits, won two MVPs and two World Series, and made 10 All-Star teams. When Kirby wasn't playing baseball, he was doing charity work, giving away millions of his salary and raising millions more. He was universally adored in the Twin Cities, not only for his baseball playing and his generosity, but also for his big smile and friendliness. I admired Kirby Puckett for his story. I spent birthday and allowance money collecting every Kirby Puckett baseball card ever produced. I got his autograph – three times. I went to see him every time the Twins came to town. I even got his children's book for Christmas: "Be the Best You Can Be," which is required reading for everyone who wants to be the best they can be. What a great story Kirby Puckett was.

But then came the rest of the story. During Spring Training in 1995, Kirby woke up blind in one eye. He was forced to retire from baseball. Suddenly, he stopped smiling. He wasn't nice to people anymore. He stopped all his charity work. He committed felonies, left his family, and was dead before fifty.

I wish it were possible to erase the last part of his story from my mind. I wish the very last thing I knew of Kirby was in 1994, before his story broke bad. Then he could still be my hero. But the rest of the story is there, and it can't be erased. Have you ever seen a story unfold like that? Sometimes stories start heroic and inspiring, but then the rest of the story crashes in a fireball of shame or scandal.

If you haven't heard a story like that in a while, let me tell you one.

This story starts out great. It starts with a girl, amazingly brave and kind, who hears that her master, a powerful general, is dying of leprosy. At the risk of her own life, she speaks up and tells her master, a man named Na'aman, to go see a prophet in her homeland of Israel. Na'aman is desperate for a cure, so he goes to Israel to find this prophet, named Elisha. Once Na'aman finds Elisha, Elisha tells him to go dip himself in the Jordan River, and he will be cured of his leprosy. At first Na'aman thinks this is insulting and downright nuts, and he's ready to go home. But his men persuade him to give it a shot. **So [Na'aman] went down and dipped in the Jordan seven times, just as the man of God had said. Then his flesh was restored like the flesh of a small child, and he was clean. Then he and his whole escort went back to the man of God. He stood in front of Elisha and said, "To be sure, now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel. Now accept a gift from your servant."**

What a great story! God heals dying Na'aman with a miraculous washing. And when it happens, Na'aman sees firsthand both the power and the love of the true God. Even though he is a foreign man from a country with false gods, the true God calls Na'aman then and there to trust in him from now on. What a story! And for a little while yet, it gets even better. **[Na'aman] stood in front of Elisha and said, "To be sure, now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel. Now accept a gift from your servant." But Elisha said, "As surely as the LORD lives, in whose presence I stand, I will not take anything." Even though Na'aman urged him to accept something, he refused. Then Na'aman said, "If you do not want anything, please give me, your servant, as much dirt as two donkeys can carry, for your servant will never again burn incense or sacrifice to other gods, but only to the LORD.**

Elisha is such a committed servant of the Lord that he will not take Na'aman's money; he is already getting paid enough, and he likely turns down the gift not because taking gifts is bad, but because he does not want the new convert Na'aman to think there is an initiation fee for living under the grace of the true God. Elisha won't take anything from newly-healed Na'aman; instead, Elisha will give Na'aman even more: dirt from the land of Israel, so that after he gets back home, Na'aman can make sacrifices to the true God on dirt from God's chosen land. It was just a symbolic thing, but it was important to Na'aman. So Elisha gave him that, too.

Now Naaman has one more issue he wants resolved before he goes home. Naaman is the most powerful military general in his country, and he is required to enter the temple of his country's false god. He knows he can't worship that god anymore, but he still has to go into the temple as part of his official duties. So Naaman says: **"But may the LORD forgive your servant this one thing: When my master goes into the house of Rimmon to bow down there and he supports himself on my arm, then I too have to bow down in the house of Rimmon. When I bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the LORD forgive your servant this one thing."**

Then Elisha said to him, "Go in peace." Elisha listens to Naaman's conflict of conscience, and he does not condemn what Naaman will have to. Instead, Elisha sends Naaman away in peace – healed of his leprosy, without having to pay a dime, with faith in the true God in his heart, with a clear conscience, ready to worship only the true God with sacrifices back in his homeland.

And wouldn't it be nice if the story ended here, with Elisha sending Naaman on his way with that blessing, "Go in peace"? Wouldn't it be nice if Naaman went home with healed skin, sins forgiven, ready to worship the God of Israel? It would be great if this were the only part of the story. It would be nice if the story ended here. But sadly, there is the rest of the story.

You heard it earlier. Gehazi rationalizes his greed and theft: "This Na'aman, this Aramean! The Arameans, who have been a thorn in our side for centuries! And this guy's their top general! Why shouldn't I take from him? Besides, it may be easy for Elisha to turn down gifts; but me, I'm just a lowly servant. I could do with more."

And after he rationalizes his greedy grab, he lies and lies and lies. Greed is one of those domino sins.

He does all of that, even though Gehazi has the privilege of being a servant of Elisha, and a servant of the Lord. He does all that, even though God is meeting all of Gehazi's needs. But serving God with his needs met is not enough for Gehazi. He decides to take from Naaman the shiny stuff that Elisha would not. He runs after Naaman to get it. He tells lies to get it. He tries to hide what he's done. Gehazi's greed wrecks an otherwise beautiful story.

Like Gehazi, God has made us his servants, people who are privileged to live in his service. Like Gehazi, God has given us everything we need to live and in most cases much, much, more. But like Gehazi, we have let greed pull us from the service of God. We, too, make our rationalizations: I can be a little creative when I calculate my taxes, because the government wastes my money, anyway. I can slack at work because my boss is a jerk sometimes. I can be shady with big companies because their CEOs are so rich.

And then we, too, make our greedy grabs. Whether they're for big bucks or a few grapes in the produce department, they are all wrong. And they all offend our God who has graciously called us to serve him with content hearts. And once we've done that, what so often comes next? Lies and lies, sin on top of sin to cover what we do wrong.

Gehazi's greed pulls him out of God's service and wrecks an otherwise beautiful story. Ours does that, too. You see, God tells us in the Bible that he has a story laid out for our lives. He has a life of service planned out for each and every one of us; he has our lives all plotted out like beautiful stories so that we can glorify him with selfless lives of service. But when our greed gets in the way it ruins the story of service to God that he had planned for our lives. Greed wrecks the story. Not just this story about Elisha and Naaman. Our stories, too.

Oh, but the story isn't quite over yet. After greedy Gehazi stands in front of Elisha, Elisha asks, **"Where were you, Gehazi?" Gehazi said, "Your servant didn't go anywhere." Then Elisha said to him, "Didn't my heart go along when the man got down from his chariot to meet you? Is this the time to take silver, or to accept clothing or olive groves or vineyards or sheep or cattle or male or female servants? Na'aman's leprosy will cling to you and to your descendants forever." Then Gehazi went out from his presence, leprous like snow.**

The letter to the Hebrews says, in the verses we heard earlier, that nothing is hidden from God in our hearts. And Elisha, the Lord's prophet, says here that his heart went with Gehazi as his greed led him to lie and steal. Even when greed doesn't work its way out with theft and lies, God's heart still goes with ours, and nothing is hidden from him.

Once Elisha identifies the greed of Gehazi, he throws him out forever. He doesn't just give Gehazi leprosy to punish him. Lepers had to isolate themselves from everyone else. This was Elisha's way of making sure that Gehazi's greed could never come back, that the greed had to go away and stay away forever, so it couldn't ruin any more stories. That's what to do with greed. Get rid of it. Throw it out; don't let it come back and ruin anything else.

But it's funny. A different person, in Elisha's position, might have done something different. Can you imagine Elisha saying to Gehazi, "You know, Gehazi, if you split that silver with me maybe we'll forget this whole thing ever happened. Give me one of those sets of clothes, and we can make this whole thing go away." That's the track some would take. But why not Elisha? Why does that greed repulse Elisha? Why does Elisha choose service to God over greed, and bounce that greed from his presence forever?

Well, you have to know the rest of Elisha's story, the part that came before. Of all the people in the nation of Israel, God hand-selected Elisha to be his prophet. He gave Elisha amazing privileges. He gave Elisha tremendous responsibilities that no one else had. In other words, God showed Elisha a lot of love, a lot of privilege, and a lot of grace in his life. Elisha's whole life was the story of God's grace, from start to finish. So when the time came to choose service to God or greed, there was no decision for Elisha. Gehazi and his greed were gone. And Elisha chose service to the true God.

How will we make our stories from here on out more like Elisha's? How will we make our lives stories of contented service free from greed and grabs and lies? Well, we know how Elisha did it by knowing the rest of his story. And we have to know the rest of our own story.

Our story started before we were even born. It started way back in all eternity, when out of all the people on earth, God chose us, for no reason other than his grace, to be his own forever. He sent his own dear Son into this world to live a life of perfect service to his Father, with never a trace of greed to pull him off the Father's will. He sent that Son to the cross to die as a sacrifice for all our sin, greed and all the rest. He raised him from the dead as a guarantee that all our sins really are washed away forever.

And then he called each of us individually to be his own in the waters of baptism, to receive his Son's forgiveness personally through faith. To this day, he has used his Word and his Supper to keep us in that saving Christian faith. That is the rest of our story; it is a story of God's love, grace and forgiveness, from before the start to a finish that never finishes. It ends, without ending, in the glory of heaven. Yes, the stories of our lives have been tainted by greed and other sins, but the rest of our story is this: God forgives our sins in the blood of his Son and promises us eternal life in heaven through faith.

Elisha chose service to God over greed, because the rest of his story was God's grace to him. And we will choose service to God and his will, because the rest of our story is his grace in Jesus Christ. We will do what Elisha did with Gehazi's greed; isolate it, throw it out of our lives, and don't let it back in. Choose service to God instead and do it because of his grace to you. Amen.