

SERMON TITLE: "Finding Freedom"
SERMON TEXT: 2 Kings 5:1-14
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: July 7, 2019, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Since this is still the Fourth of July weekend, I thought it would be good for us to have an Independence Day kind of sermon. So, in preparation for today, I did a survey of scriptures that talk about freedom. For example, we could have focused on the Exodus, when God used Moses to lead the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt. Or we could have gone to the writings of the Apostle Paul in the New Testament. There's a passage in Paul's Letter to the Romans in which he wrote about their relationship with the governing authorities. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul turned from politics to personal life and wrote that single persons might choose not to get married so they could stay free from obligations to a spouse. And, in his Letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul wrote that those who had not succumbed to circumcision should value their freedom in Christ—a freedom from the burden of Jewish law and any other kind of slavery that might entangle them.

Maybe some other Fourth of July weekend we can focus on those scriptures. Today, instead, I decided on 2 Kings, chapter 5. There we see how Naaman, the commander of Aram's army, went about finding freedom from his leprosy. We don't all have health problems, but most of us do have troubles that bind us up in one way or another. So let's take a look at Naaman's story and see what pointers it will give us for finding freedom.

1—ACCEPT HELP FROM OTHERS

In finding freedom from his disease, the first thing Naaman did was accept help from others. We have to give Naaman a lot of credit for this. He was a great man, highly regarded, valiant and victorious. A man of his prominence easily could have dismissed all offers of help. He easily could have turned down all advice that was given. But, for some reason, the important and macho military

commander was willing to cross a number of cultural barriers to accept the suggestion of a young, foreign, slave, girl. Do you hear how nearly impossible that would be for a man of his time?

Perhaps Naaman was more receptive to this message because it came through his wife—rather than directly from the girl herself. But, even then, we have to give Naaman credit. How many husbands don't even listen to the advice of their wives? How many wives don't even listen to the advice of their husbands?

Sometimes important help comes to us from people with whom we work, those who play with us on sports teams, or those who live in our neighborhood. Sometimes useful suggestions are provided by Christian friends in the congregation who are looking out for our health and well-being. Finding freedom from his disease began when Naaman was willing to accept help from others.

2—SEEK HELP

Naaman's second step in finding freedom was being willing to seek help. Sometimes help comes to us out of the blue and drops in our laps. We call it luck or good fortune. We call it serendipity or blessing. But other times when we need help, we actually have to go asking for it. Fortunately, Naaman wasn't afraid or ashamed to go to his king and ask for the additional help he needed.

Naaman's willingness to seek help from his commanding officer is different from many of the military stories we've heard about in our time. Over the past two or three decades—as U.S. soldiers came home from the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, and Iraq—we've heard that it wasn't easy for them to seek help. When the injury was to an arm or leg, that wasn't so difficult. But, if the injury was to their mind, to their mental and emotional health, well that's been a different story. Unlike a broken bone, a brain injury is a lot more difficult for everyone to recognize, and a lot more likely to be denied and covered up. And that lack of visible wounds has caused many of our men and women in uniform to suffer terribly. They've had a difficult time asking for help because they've been afraid they won't be taken seriously or that they'll be perceived as weak.

Such shame in seeking help isn't just a problem of the military. It's a terrible indictment of our whole society. The recent #ME TOO movement pointed out how hard it has been for victims of sexual assault to speak about the damage done to them. Admitting our problems is a risk, for sure. But the only way we're going to make our society more responsive is if we change our attitudes and our actions. The shame and social stigmas will go away as more of us bring these problems to light and seek the help we need.

3—SURROUND SELF WITH AN ACCOUNTABLE SUPPORT SYSTEM

A third reason why Naaman was successful in finding freedom from his leprosy was that he surrounded himself with an accountable support system. By that, I mean he had people around him who told him the truth in love. Naaman was a great man, but he wasn't perfect. Yes, he was willing to *accept help* to a point. And, yes, he was willing to set aside his shame and *seek help* to a point. But, when the prophet Elisha didn't even bother to come out of the house and meet him, Naaman took offense. When all Naaman got from his long and uncomfortable trip was a lowly servant telling him to go dip in the dirty Jordan River, well, that was just too much for Naaman to bear. If he were going to lower himself into a river, he could do it back home in the much better rivers of Damascus. "Dip myself in the Jordan River seven times!" we can almost hear Naaman muttering with a few choice expletives. No way. No how. He wasn't going to do it.

That's when Naaman's accountable support system kicked in. If his servants hadn't stood up to him and told him the truth, he might never have gotten well. Naaman would have remained in bondage to disease and misery. But, to his credit, Naaman had encircled himself with people who were honest, wise, and courageous. They told it to him like it was. They didn't baby him. They didn't let him get away with self-deceit and self-defeat.

How important this is! How important it is for all of us to surround ourselves not just with people who love us, but with people who love us enough to tell us the truth. We need people who

won't put up with our misbehavior and nonsense. We need people who will hold us accountable for doing the right thing. Often we'd rather the folks around us were more gentle and understanding. Often we'd rather hear them sing our praise—because we need that too. But finding freedom is so very difficult that we can't do with just smiles, hugs, and kisses. That's why 12-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous work. If we're really going to break loose from the troubles that keep us in chains, it's essential that we surround ourselves with a support system of people who will tell it like it is and hold us accountable for finding our freedom.

4—OBEY

Naaman wasn't there yet, however. There was one more thing he needed to do. In order to find his freedom from leprosy, Naaman needed to obey. Naaman didn't like what Elisha's servant told him to do, but in the end, he did it. The mighty warrior put away his pride and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan River.

It's interesting that there's nothing said here about faith. This was not a faith healing in the way we normally would think of that. In fact, it seemed like Naaman had significant doubts. Instead, this was a healing that came from simple obedience. Naaman's faith came later when he saw the results. After he was healed, that's when Naaman returned to Elisha's house and proclaimed his belief in God.

Faith is always a good thing to have—and the sooner the better. But, if you don't have faith, then you can at least begin with obedience. This reminds me of a time in John Wesley's life when he was struggling with his lack of faith. Wesley thought he should quit preaching until he could shake off that dark night of his soul. But a deeply spiritual person counseled Wesley otherwise. Don't stop preaching until you get faith, was the advice. Instead, preach faith until you have faith. In other words, obey your calling to preach, and through that obedience, faith and healing will come. And, as that happened for John Wesley, so it can happen for all of us who obey God's voice in our lives.

Obedience is hard because it often requires us to step beyond our comfort zones. In Naaman's case, he had to lower himself below the social status to which he was accustomed. For some of us, obedience might require us to think more highly of ourselves than we normally do and recognize the worth that God attributes to us. For yet others, obedience might require us to stop hiding behind the safety net of harmful substances, hurtful relationships, fatalistic attitudes, or self-absorbed fantasies. Whether it's the first step we take or the last step, obedience to God is essential in finding freedom.

CONCLUSION

There's an old hymn that asks the question, "Would you be free from your burden of sin?" The second verse asks, "Would you be free from your passion and pride?" To both questions, the song responds that there is wonderful liberating power available through Jesus Christ. Likewise, the prayer chorus that we sang this morning tells us that, as Christian people, we don't have to live in chains of bondage to anyone or anything. Through our Savior's amazing grace, we can be set free.

Whether our burden is sin or sickness, relationship problems or financial struggle, the promise of the Christian faith is freedom. Galatians 5 tells us that "it is for freedom that Christ has set us free." So let's *accept* the help that's offered to us. Let's *seek* the additional help that we need. Let's *surround* ourselves with an *accountable* support system. And let's *obey* God's calling. As Naaman's story tells us, those are the key steps for finding freedom.