

SIMPLE SOLUTIONS

July 7, 2019

Pentecost 4

[2nd Kings 5:1-3,9-14](#)

[Galatians 6:1-10](#)

(prayer)

Recently, I re-watched the 1989 *Ron Howard* directed movie: [Parenthood](#).

That flick is rich with the complexity of relationships across five generations of one family. I think that it would hard for anyone to watch *Parenthood* and *not* see a representation of someone they know (or even yourself) up on the screen.

Truth-based comedy is a very effective form of humour.

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One of my favorite [scenes](#) in *Parenthood* is where the entire extended family have been invited by the patriarch (*Frank Buchmann* played by Jason Robards) to gather together for a shared meal on the occasion of his youngest adult son (and wild child of the family), Larry, being back in town. A lot of themes are at play: unresolved pasts, suspicion, rivalry, resentment, embarrassment, and even (hard to believe) unconditional love.

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Larry announces to his family that he is in town again because he has got a great... big... business deal in the works: that pretty soon, he'll be *taking care of everybody*.

MARILYN (MOM)

"This isn't another get-rich-quick scheme, is it Larry?"

FRANK (DAD)

"What's wrong with getting rich quick.

Quick is the best way to get rich."

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Even if you haven't seen the movie, you can probably guess how things turned out.

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In this life, there are seldom quick fixes to complex problems.

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From a metaphoric perspective, it is fair to presume that it will take at least as long to get out of a hole as it does to dig it.

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That doesn't stop us from wanting for, wishing for, praying for... the quick and easy solution.

What's wrong with getting rich quick.

Quick is the best way to get rich.

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Naaman (in the reading from Second Kings) experiences the opposite problem. He was suspicious of the *quick fix*.

The text describes him as a mighty warrior who rose up to command the armies of Aram (a nation east of the ancient kingdom of Israel).

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Naaman suffered from some kind of chronic skin ailment - the text describes it as "leprosy", but it may or may not have been the specific bacterial infection now known as Hansen's Disease... but that's beside the point.

His "leprosy" may not have dramatically impeded Naaman's ability to command the troops, but it was a problem for him.

I am quite certain that he had tried every medical and homeopathic remedy that was available. He probably had seen every doctor and purported healer that he could find.

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Most likely, the condition was physically uncomfortable (perhaps it flared on and off); it may or may not have been contagious, but I suspect that Naaman was very self-conscious of his appearance when he was having a flare-up and didn't let on to others.

Even if Naaman's ailment was not actually very contagious, people would likely have made assumptions about it. It would have made Naaman vulnerable to the judgements of others.

And so, it wouldn't surprise me, if Naaman did his best to hide his *leprosy* - especially from those under his command. In fact, my guess is that only those closest to Naaman even knew. The king may not have even known - all the sovereign really cared about was military success and enough troop morale that they'd follow orders.

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But... in the privacy of his own home, when Naaman could relax and take off his *work clothes*, he was likely less guarded. Maybe, there was a ointment he used at night or it was a relief to let his infection breathe.

Second Kings implies that Naaman's wife's servant must have caught a glimpse of his bare skin. She tells her mistress about Elisha, the wonder-worker-prophet from her home country of Israel.

[You may have noticed that I skipped over verses four to eight this morning. My reasoning was to keep the narrative flowing; those verses are kind of an *aside*: describing the complicated diplomatic process by which Naaman got permission from the Israelite king (via a formal written request from the Aramite king) to seek out healing in Israel. Eventually, Naaman received an invitation from Elisha to come to Samaria.

The important fact to take from those middle verses (that weren't read this mornint) is that... there was quite an involved diplomatic process that had to take place before Naaman could seek out Elisha's help. It wasn't a simple thing for Naaman to go see Elisha.]

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Once he got the go-ahead, the reknowned Aramite army commander organized an impressive entourage and arrived at Elisha's house in the town of Samaria.

I am quite doubtful that the lower level accompanying company knew the details of why they were making this trip. Only, Naaman's closest attendants might have known. Their commander said "march" and they followed his orders.

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Naaman was surprised that after all of *that* effort the prophet didn't come out to personally greet him. All they got was a simple servant's message: *I'm sorry, the prophet Elisha is unable to see you at this time. But he does thank you for your visit and says go wash yourself seven times in the Jordan River and your flesh will be made clean.*

This bothered Naaman on a couple of levels:

1. Why couldn't Elisha come out and just call on his God to heal him on the spot? They had come all this way and expected a more personal treatment. The countries' kings had arranged this meeting; it was a big deal.
2. Naaman might have wondered how this looked to his soldiers: they had come all this way and the *prophet* didn't seem to care. Would this cause the soldiers to question their commander's authority?
3. And why the Jordan? What is so special about its waters? In Naaman's mind, the Abana and Pharpar rivers of Aman are more mighty than the Jordan, why not wash in them. In fact, they had to cross the Jordan to get to Samaria, this felt like back-tracking.
4. This whole trip had been a colossal waste of time and effort.

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Naaman's ego was bruised so he left in a huff.

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He expected an acknowledgement of his status.

And Naaman expected a dramatic healing; he expected it all to be a big production that would impress the company he had brought with him.

Naaman had to imagine that something (that would be such a big deal in his life) would involve more than bathing in a muddy stream.

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It was one of Naaman's own attendants who pointed out that if the prophet Elisha had given him

more complicated instructions to be healed, he probably would have followed them. Why not just do this *easy thing* on the way home? After all, they had to cross this insignificant little river on the way home, anyway.

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What did Naaman have to lose at this point?

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And so, when they got to the Jordan on their journey back to Aram, Naaman did what Elisha's messenger had said to do and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan River.

When Naaman dried himself off, his skin disease was gone.

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It didn't follow the normal pattern that big problems require big solutions: that complex situations need complicated fixes.

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So, what was involved in Naaman's healing?

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On the surface, it was a simple bathing.

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But there is more.

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In order for Naaman to get to that point, he had to do something that was actually quite challenging for him.

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He had to park his ego.

He had to admit that his status (and the power it gave him) had no power over his illness.

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These were truths that he *did* know, but they were not something he was prepared to admit openly. He had a reputation to uphold. How could he command the respect of his soldiers; how could he intimidate his enemies? Would he still be able to lead if everyone knew that he was powerless over an illness most often associated with the most poor and vulnerable?

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Over the years, the hidden fact of his *leprosy* was something Naaman only allowed those closest to him to know.

By following the seemingly insignificant instructions in an insignificant place, Naaman surrendered his power.

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Swimming in a river is simple.

Allowing one's self to be truly vulnerable is not.

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But there's more:

Let's review *how* the healing word of God was expressed to Naaman:

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- It is first spoken by a girl who had been human trafficked into indentured servitude. For her to even presume to comment on her mistress' husband's life was an usual act of courage from a person with absolutely no power.
- The next voice is that of Elisha's messenger. The famous prophet of God was silent and unseen. A low-level employee was dispatched instead to share (what turned out to be) such a simple message that Naaman felt like he was being brushed off.
- Finally, it was Naaman's own underling who offered wisdom. *Why not give the river washing a try?*

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Long before Naaman drenched his body in healing waters, he had to open his ears to voices that (within his ego-centric world view) were normally muted.

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Admitting we are not always able to be masters of our own destiny is not a simple thing to do.

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In the [language](#) of twelve step addiction management programs, the first thing a person does is to admit that they are powerless over the product of their addiction and they are willing to trust that something beyond themselves will help them find restoration.

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The "first step" is often one of the hardest to take. To move into an uncertain future with only hope as a companion is the height of pure vulnerability.

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Our egos have us hardwired to say: *I can handle anything.*

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Two weeks ago, (during the children's story) I made reference to a story about Elisha's predecessor (1st Kings 19:1-15)... Elijah had been rejected by the people of Israel and felt more powerless than he ever had been, so he escaped into the Sinai wilderness. Elijah felt inspired to go out and stand on Mount Horeb, for he instinctively knew that his God, Yahweh (The LORD), was about to pass by.

Elijah experienced a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks into pieces, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a ***sound of sheer silence.***

A Sound of Sheer Silence -- this is translated in the King James Version as *a still small voice*, but I like the absurdity of the oxymoronic phrase the sound of silence.

In order to hear God, Elijah had to stop listening. He had to let go of all expectations and just... be.

It reminds me of a line from Psalm 46: *Be still and know that I am God.*

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It is far from simple to give over to our vulnerability. But, it is almost always an early step on the path to personal rejuvenation, restoration and reclamation.

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As the modern proverb goes: *Let go. Let God.*

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Naaman's first step was to trust in the muted voices of the ones he considered insignificant. He had to set aside his assumptions about power.

Several centuries later, the Apostle Paul would remind to early christians in Galatians: *those who think they are something, deceive themselves.*

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We could call this the gospel according to Joni Mitchell: *Don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you've got 'till it's gone.*

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Swimming is a river is simple.

Allowing one's self to be truly vulnerable is not.

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When one accepts their vulnerability, they allow the community to hold them up.

The people of first century Galatian church were encouraged to be aware of *not only* their own abilities and limits, but to be mindful of the abilities and limits of others... so that no one falls victim to the burdens they are unable to bear on their own.

In that section of the letter we heard this morning, Paul implies that the Galatians have a long way to go. He wants this supportive attitude to reach beyond the church whenever it has the opportunity - but he acknowledges that they may not even be living this out within the church.

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Paul reminds the church that while we are each responsible for our own well-being (that we are not to give up on ourselves)... that even the best of us will have times when our vulnerability will outweigh our ability.

The people are to respond with compassion not judgment.

They are to be more than individual believers, but also a community of faith -- a family of faith.

And... they are to be more than an isolated group, but one that is mindful and supportive of the unbearable burdens beyond their own members.

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The two readings from today point us to the same kind of situation from opposite directions:

- Naaman needed to admit his vulnerability to be able to find the rejuvenation that he could not attain through his own influence and power.
- Paul invited the church to be a community that steps up to be the burden bearers for the vulnerable.

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In 1982, United Methodist hymnwriter and musician, Jim Strathdee composed *In Loving Partnership*. This song entered of the UCCan hymn tradition when it was included in the 1987 supplement to our 1971 *Hymn Book*, called [Songs for a Gospel People](#) (affectionately known in United Churches as "the green book").

Strathdee describes this back and forth burden bearing and sharing: a *Loving Partnership*.

*We are the hands and feet of Christ
serving by grace each other's needs.*

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*We dare to risk and sacrifice
with truthful word and faithful deed.*

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Let us be loving partners.

- Who do our part;
- Who know our limits, even as we try to expand them;
- Who are mindful of the vulnerable among us and beyond us.

It is just that simple.

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Let us pray:

Wonderful God, help us to listen for your voice in our everyday lives and teach us to show kindness and love in every place we go. Amen.

With popularity grown out of its inclusion in SGP, Jim Strathdee's hymn was included in Voices United. Let's sing to together now:

#603VU "In Loving Partnership"