

Healing and humility Naaman and the servant girl

A sermon on 2 Kings 5 by Teash Taylor

The lectionary reading I've decided to focus on today is the reading from 2 Kings 5:1-14. I'll be honest I chose this passage because of its unfamiliarity. Because of its strangeness. In undergrad I studied anthropology, the study of cultures, be it subcultures within our own culture or cultures more foreign. There's a saying in anthropology that describes much of what the discipline hopes to do. "Make the strange familiar and the familiar strange." I often think of this saying when engaging with Biblical texts. How is the text strange and what does the text have to teach us about our own strangeness?

Our narrative is set in Syria, called Aram in this text. Now Naaman is a military commander, he's powerful. Naaman is the kind of political officer who wouldn't see much combat anymore but would make big decisions and hold the press conferences. He's a man who seems to have everything. Money, and much power and privilege, he has the King's ear and respect.

But he finds out he's got leprosy. This didn't just mean he was sick and dying. It meant that while he was sick and dying he would be an absolute outcast. No wealth and privilege could protect him from the social stigma of leprosy. How did it first start for him? Did he notice it but think "surely not?" But then did it become all too apparent and he could no longer deny it? And so we find Naaman this man of war, action and power, completely powerless.

How desperate is Naaman? It appears that he is quite desperate because he listens and

takes seriously the advice of a servant girl. An Israelite girl stolen as a spoil of war. Making servants of your enemies was common, indeed something the Israelites also practiced. She was in his house the lowest of the low; a foreigner, young and servant not even to him but to his wife. She speaks about 16 words in English and only ten in Hebrew. That is all we hear from her. She is nameless as are many people, women in particular, in the Bible. With no name and few words, she alters the story. She confidently tells him of a prophet in a far away land.

I'm incredibly curious about this girl. We know nothing about her other than that she is young, from Israel and when her people lost a war she was taken away from her homeland to serve in a foreign country.

In Jewish sacred literature, midrash is the primary rabbinic term for exegesis. In Biblical Hebrew the verb *d-r-sh* means, "to seek". It's a tradition of translation, interpretation, re-imaginings of dominant readings, the creation of new ones and asking questions of the text. Midrash, as Hebrew Bible scholar Dr Wilda Gafney explains, is the close reading of the text, particularly the Masoretic Text, the interpreting of the text, behind, beyond and before the reader as well as "the text between the lines of the text". It's stories in between the story.

You've probably seen more contemporary forms in sermons before. It's when the preacher says: "Imagine how Mary felt with Jesus in her belly. Imagine how tired she was as they couldn't find any room in the Inn, imagine her shoulders drooping". It's an exercise in imagining beyond the text. But it is also informed by the text and by tradition and in Gafney's case by extensive research and knowledge of Hebrew and the Hebrew Bible.

Gafney wrote a wonderful book called Womanist midrash. Womanist midrash is similar to traditional rabbinical midrash in that it is “a set of interpretive practices, including translation, exegesis, and biblical interpretation,” however it specifically focuses on marginalised characters, particularly girls and women. It acknowledges in reference to women, girls, foreigners and enslaved people in particular “that often the text does not speak, to or for them, let alone hear them”. Gafney often employs her “sanctified imagination” to “fill out” the text giving women names and voices that they have often been denied in the text. And so her work informs my questioning. What is this young girl’s story? I wonder what her name would be? What else would she say if she had more than 10 or 15 words? What happens to her after Naaman is healed? What was she risking by speaking up? What would have been running through her head as she told Naaman about the prophet? Why did she do it? Did she care for Naaman or for his wife? How was it being a servant in their household? How much did she miss her homeland? Did she have brothers or sisters there? A lover? Did she miss her mum? Her dad? Did she know if they were alive? I encourage you to sit with those questions. I can’t answer them. But I think it’s good to ask questions of the text and to creatively engage with it. I leave those questions with your imaginations.

And so Naaman is in Aram and this healing prophet the unnamed girl has told him of is in Samaria. His enemy. To go see the prophet requires him to venture into enemy territory, an enemy he is clearly better than, he has taken servants from there after all. So Naaman goes to his King. The King reaches out to the King of Israel and says, please heal Naaman. The part about the prophet seems to get lost. The King of Israel receives this incredibly odd message.

Please heal someone of leprosy. The King of Israel knew this was impossible! Is it a trap?

What can he do? His power and wealth do nothing for him either.

Elisha hears of the King's anxiety and says to send Naaman to him. Elisha, like his predecessor Elijah is recorded as facilitating divine healings. Their healings often feature interesting rituals. Certain things are done in a specific order. And so the King sends Naaman to Elisha.

Naaman arrives at Elisha's in style. He has many chariots and servants demonstrating his high status. Wealth and bravado, hiding his vulnerability. Naaman here reminds me to look past other people's wealth and bravado and see their humanity and vulnerability too. And so Naaman rocks up. But Elisha doesn't even come out to greet him. He sends out a messenger. It's almost like the queen or at least Prince Harry came over specifically to see you, they've travelled far and you ignore them. Elisha is not impressed by his wealth and status. The 'messenger' or 'servant' (depending on the translation) of Elisha's tells Naaman to wash 7 times in the Jordan river.

Hebrew Bible Scholar Walter Brueggeman says about Naaman "he goes loaded with rich goods in order to impress, in order to assert his status, in order to pay his medical bills... (but) The General does not understand that the healing... is not a market transaction. The truth of the matter is the gift of life is not a commodity; it is a gift always given as a miracle."

The general will not have healing on his terms or in a way that he is comfortable with. He must humble himself. Elisha's instructions must have sounded like wild folk remedy to him.

Naaman is not impressed, in fact he is furious. He raves about Elisha not even greeting him let alone healing him in person. He's mad about the simplicity of going into the Jordan. Surely he, Naaman deserves something more impressive. Why would he wash in their crappy river when he knows the rivers of Damascus to be far superior? Not a crappy river in foreign enemy lands. He senses that his status is being somewhat mocked or at the very least is not impressive to Elisha. He may have just heard a possible way to be healed but as Brueggeman says "He doesn't want the good news" if it diminishes his status.

But again servants alter the story dramatically. They convince him to do it. This is the third time in the story that either a servant or a messenger has drastically altered the story. We may still know Naaman's name, but the unnamed servants have a massive impact. So Naaman does it and he comes out healed. He humbly goes back to Elisha to give his thanks and to acknowledge what God has done for him.

I wonder how often we miss opportunities of healing because we feel it diminishes our status. It might not be medical healing, indeed for many of us it probably isn't. Maybe we were wrong and we owe someone an apology. For me at least before I've experienced deep healing in personal relationships I've first needed to experience deep humility. What about us as a Nation? Do we come in our chariots and wealth and ignore what we can learn from other cultures that perhaps we look down on because we think they are not like us?

Those of us who are non-Indigenous have so much to learn from Indigenous peoples of Australia. We are realising more and more that our over-complicated and brutalising things

are not working. We need humility and to listen and act on Indigenous peoples' advice if there is to be healing in this country. The theme of this year's Naidoc week is Voice, Treaty and Truth. We need to listen to Indigenous voices, lift them up, engage in truth telling and create long lasting change through a treaty if there is to be healing in this land.

The general is healed! The servant girl was right. We are told that his skin was like that of a young boy. But the Hebrew phrase 'young boy' with a masculine ending is like the characterization of the young girl in verse 2. The narrative appears to be rather deliberately saying that his skin has become like hers. He, who at the start was so different to her, has become like her. He is healed, and he is not just healed but ritually clean. It means he can now go back to his life. He can again be in society, in community.

Earlier I brought up midrash the practice of deeply engaging with the text and seeing the stories within the story. Dr Wilda Gafney, whom I also mentioned earlier, depicts Jacob's wrestle with God as a metaphor for midrash. For Gafney, the God and the text are there to be wrestled with and struggled against and just maybe like Jacob we may leave with a blessing.

I want to acknowledge that one of the things we may wrestle with in this text is healing. Specifically, divine healing. I think one of the things at least that I have wrestled with is not that divine healing happens so much as why doesn't it? Because in this text healing happens and it's wonderful. But often it doesn't. When my Mum got sick with cancer, her church and so many others prayed for her healing. Thousands. Despite peoples honest, heartfelt and passionate prayers she was not healed. She passed away five days before my second

birthday. So I don't want to hold this text up and pretend that healing will always come. I won't offend you with corny sayings and platitudes. Some things we cannot tie into bows. I'm sure we've all had prayers for healing go unanswered. So talking about healing is complex.

But I also believe that healing can happen. I believe that when we think of healing we also need to expand from just thinking about the physical. We can also think about the emotional, spiritual and relational.

For me I've found an incredible amount of healing in the LGBTIQ+ community, particularly amongst LGBTIQ+ Christians. 5 years ago if you'd asked me whether that community had had any impact on me let alone such a profound one I would have said 'no way'. But when I was coming out, when I found myself questioning whether there was a place for me in the church, in community, they offered me hope and healing and held me. They showed me that healing and love comes from places that we once may never have expected. From foreign enemies in Naaman's case or from people I once looked down on as sinners in mine.

The final part of our narrative wasn't in the reading but I'll paraphrase it. After the healing when Naaman arrives back at Elisha's, Elisha refuses money and gifts. The healing is free. It is not Elisha's to give but God's. Naaman says to Elisha, I acknowledge your God is the God but I must bow in the house of Rimmon, the Syrian god. It's undoubtedly part of his public duty. We might expect that Elisha would remonstrate him. Instead he simply says, go in peace. It is a no strings attached healing. What happens after is up to Naaman. May we also offer no strings attached healings to one another drawing on the strength of a healing God

giving freely and accepting freely and in humility.

May we look for healing in unlikely places. May our land be healed as we seek listen, learn, pay respect to and work towards a treaty with our Indigenous peoples. May we all be surprised by the ways in which healing comes to us, a radical and free gift.

Go in peace.