

The Sin of Entitlement

February 16, 2020

As we begin our reflection this morning I would like to invite you into a fictitious story. It is a story that I've created. It is a story in which I invite you to imagine. Imagine that the son of Russian President Vladimir Putin had an unsightly scar across his left cheek. Imagine that a member of the Canadian embassy in Russia confided to the president that there was a surgeon in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan who could remove this scar. Acting upon this information, imagine that President Putin contacts Prime Minister Trudeau and asks him to arrange an appointment for his son with the Saskatoon doctor. Imagine the diplomacy and security, imagine the protocol and the publicity, as this young man is welcomed to Canada, transported to Saskatoon, and ushered into the waiting room of the well-known doctor.

Now, imagine that the doctor, who has already seen a photograph of the scar on the boy's face, is notified by his nurse that the renowned guest has arrived. Beckoning the nurse to his desk the doctor scribbles out a prescription and asks the nurse to deliver it to his celebrity patient. The nurse returns to the waiting room and the doctor returns to his paperwork. The nurse hands the prescription to the young Mr. Putin who reads, "Purchase capsules containing 500mg of vitamin E and rub it on your scar twice a day for a year and it will disappear." The doctor doesn't look at the scar nor does he meet his patient but instead suggests a cure so simple that it appears that the young Mr. Putin need not to have left Russia. Imagine the response of the young Mr. Putin. Imagine the response of his father the President. Imagine the response of his Canadian hosts, of the diplomatic community, of the world press. If you can imagine their response, then it is likely that you'll understand the reaction of a certain Biblical character called, Naaman.

We discover the story of Naaman in the pages of the Hebrew portion of our Bible, that area we once called the 'old' testament. Naaman is a much decorated Syrian military officer and a personal confidant of the King of Syria. Naaman is also a man who suffers from the painful and potentially fatal disease of leprosy. In one of his many battles, a young Hebrew girl is taken into captivity and pressed into service as a maid to Naaman's wife. Observing Naaman's leprosy, the young maid tells Naaman's wife that she knows a healer – a prophet really – in her home country who could heal Naaman. This news gradually works its way up to the King of Syria.

The King composes a letter to his counterpart the King of Israel and asks for him to arrange a meeting for Naaman with the Israelite healer. He provides plentiful gifts of money and goods and sends Naaman off to seek healing. As we read in the story, the King of Israel, a minor player in the ancient political world, is deeply worried about how to respond to the Syrian request. He arranges for Naaman to meet the Israelite prophet Elisha in the hope that he can heal the distinguished visitor. Naaman and his entourage arrive at Elisha's home. Before Naaman even has a chance to dismount from his carriage Elisha sends a servant out to greet him. "Don't bother coming in," says the servant, "my master says that all you need to be healed is to go to the Jordan River and wash yourself seven times."

There was no conclusion to the imaginary tale with which we started this morning's reflection. We do not know how President Putin's son would respond, or President Putin, or our Prime Minister, or the world press to the apparent snub by a Saskatoon doctor. We do know how Naaman responds. The scripture tells us that Naaman is in a rage. "Who does Elisha think he is sending out his servant to speak to me? Does he not know who I am? Does he not know who I represent? He didn't pray for me or give me ointment or even look at me! Did I travel all the way to Israel just to bathe in the muddy water of the Jordan River?"

Fortunately Naaman has some wise servants. They implore him: "Sir if the prophet had told you to do something difficult you would have done it. Why can't you wash yourself and be cured?" As the closing verses tell us, Naaman accepts their advice, dips seven times in the Jordan and is cured of all signs of leprosy.

We're curious as to whether the Jordan River contains healing mineral deposits, but of course the essence of this story is not the healing. It is the story of a sin, in some ways a subtle sin, which almost cost Naaman his life. It is a story about the sin of entitlement and privilege by which Naaman almost cast aside his cure. It is the sin in which Naaman believed that he deserved deferential treatment; it is the sin that besets anyone who believes they are entitled to power, privilege and special favour.

The world is plagued by entitlement, by those who believe they are privileged to have their needs and their lives treated differently than others. There are those who believe that they have the right to jump the queue for an MRI because they have the privilege of affluence. While living in a resort community during our last week in Mexico it was apparent that some guests thought that it was the 'natural order' for them to be served by their Mexican hosts rather than accepting that it was a business transaction not a '**right**' that came with their skin colour or the size of their bank account. The subtle sin of entitlement can so easily find its way into the psyche. For generations Canadians of Anglo-Saxon descent believed they should receive preferential treatment over newly arriving Slavic immigrants. There are many today who believe that their skin colour should ensure their rights ahead of differently shaded newcomers. The subtle sin of entitlement is far reaching. Can you believe that for generations men believed that they were entitled to have women prepare their meals and darn their socks!

Naaman saved his life only because he became willing to listen to some of the least privileged people in his community. He was willing to listen to a little Hebrew slave girl who told him about a healer named Elisha. More so he listened to his servants who advised him to set aside his pride, his power and his privilege and to wade out into the muck of the Jordan River to be healed.

Throughout history some people have assumed they have privilege by denying the inherent God-given dignity of other people. The theologian, Richard Rhor observes: The vast majority of people throughout history have been poor, disabled, or oppressed in some way and would have read history in terms of a need for

change, but most history has been written and interpreted from the side of the winners. The unique exception is the revelation called the Bible, which is an alternative history from the side of the often enslaved, dominated and oppressed people of Israel ... We see in the Gospels that it's the lame, the poor, the blind, the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the sinners, the outsiders, and the foreigners who tend to follow Jesus.

When Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, the Bible and its message entered a two thousand year period of being co-opted by those who, motivated by power and greed, sought privilege for themselves. The church blessed the voyage of Christopher Columbus and almost every other colonizing mission in history. As a benefactor of colonization I often find it difficult to identify the remarkable privilege I have inherited and this inability to identify my privilege limits the lives of others.

In the last couple of weeks our country has been embroiled in a kind of tug of war between some members of the Wet'suwet'en tribe and the forces of commerce. I began reading about this story while I was in Mexico. I read about the court ruling which deemed the occupation of a pipe line development illegal. I read about the division between the Band councils and the hereditary chiefs. I read about the decision to have the protesters removed by the police. I read about the protests and blockades by first nation's people across the country. And I read about the countless people from commuters to labourers to farmers who have been impacted by these blockades. I immediately brought my worldview to bear on the situation. I thought about the court decision and the rule of law. I thought about economic development which had been welcomed by the indigenous Band councils. I thought about our economy and how the disruption of roads and rail make ordinary people - who appear to have nothing to do with pipelines - the victims of the protest. Then I thought about Naaman and how his world view almost cost him his life. I thought about the wisdom that came from the underside, from his servants, to see things through a different lens.

And with Naaman's experience in mind, and with Jesus' allegiance clearly expressed in his declaration, "Blessed are the poor" - I had to rethink my privilege. I had to realize that I have never had my land occupied – that my right to my precious little plot at Wakaw Lake has never been disputed. I had to realize that I was never taken from my parents and placed in a residential school where I was threatened with all manner of abuse. I had to recognize that the practice of my religion has never been deemed illegal. I had to realize that my drinking water has never made me sick. The subtle sin of my privilege and entitlement could become the seedbed of oppression for those who live without such privilege.

Frankly I don't know the way forward through this current dilemma with the First Peoples of this country. It is true that we cannot rewind history but we can write a new history as we move forward. What we must not do is allow our privilege to blind us to the way of Jesus. When I'm affronted that a court ruling is being ignored or that protesters appear to break the law, I must first ask myself who made the law and who

benefits from it. Is it possible that when we are willing to listen to those on the opposite side of privilege we might, like Naaman, actually save our lives? We who claim to walk in the way of Jesus cannot always expect to feel comfortable, but we are called to align ourselves with the God-power – the power of love, justice, compassion and courage; the power that seeks to do undo privilege in order that all might have life. May God give us eyes to see and ears to hear. Amen.

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