

How Much Faith is Enough?
Sermon for the 3rd Sunday after Epiphany
Sermon Text: 2 Kings 5:1-19a



Naaman, commander of the army of the king Syria, was a great man with his master and in high favor, because by him the Lord had given victory to Syria. He was a mighty man of valor, but he was a leper. ² Now the Syrians on one of their raids had carried off a little girl from the land of Israel, and she worked in the service of Naaman's wife. ³ She said to her mistress, "Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." ⁴ So Naaman went in and told his lord, "Thus and so spoke the girl from the land of Israel." ⁵ And the king of Syria said, "Go now, and I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So he went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing. ⁶ And he brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you Naaman my servant, that you may cure him of his leprosy." ⁷ And when the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Only consider, and see how he is seeking a quarrel with me." ⁸ But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent to the king, saying, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come now to me, that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel." ⁹ So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and stood at the door of Elisha's house. ¹⁰ And Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean." ¹¹ But Naaman was angry and went away, saying, "Behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper. ¹² Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?" So he turned and went away in a rage. ¹³ But his servants came near and said to him, "My father, it is a great word the prophet has spoken to you; will you not do it? Has he actually said to you 'Wash, and be clean'?" ¹⁴ So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean. ¹⁵ Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company, and he came and stood before him. And he said, "Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel; so accept now a present from your servant." ¹⁶ But he said, "As the Lord lives, before whom I stand, I will receive none." And he urged him to take it, but he refused. ¹⁷ Then Naaman said, "If not, please let there be given to your servant two mule loads of earth, for from now on your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god but the Lord. ¹⁸ In this matter may the Lord pardon your servant: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, the Lord pardon your servant in this matter." ¹⁹ He said to him, "Go in peace."

"Are you a Christian?" Achim asked his friend Joseph. Now Joseph didn't want to answer directly with a yes because he knew about his other friend, Mike, who annoyed people day in and day out by reciting Bible verses and the others made fun of Mike for that. Joseph also didn't want to say "no" because he was actually a Christian and wanted to remain a Christian. He finally answered: "Yes, I'm a Christian but just a little." By saying this, Joseph could get by as a Christian in his school class without losing popularity. But what does "a little faith" actually mean? I know Jesus said that faith as small as a mustard seed can move mountains. But is this faith that we call just a "little bit", still faith at all? What even is faith, and when can you say a person has lost their faith? You'll notice already that we now try to measure something that isn't actually capable of being measured by human measurements. Yet we want to do that so badly. That's why I ask once again: "Aren't there criteria by which faith can be measured?" I brought a measuring tape with me today. This measuring tape is used to measure things. Indeed, there is something like a measuring tape for faith – take the 10 Commandments for example. Those who obey the 10 Commandments should be strong in faith. At least that's the theory. But what if a person doesn't obey them all? Or *can't* obey them all? Well, people are creative. Where something doesn't fit with the 10 Commandments, we find that the measuring tape can be bent. We can do one or two forbidden things and omit one or two of the Commandments – the main thing is that we do something different to them.

The measuring tape is twisted into a triangle, for example: "At least we love all people and are nice to one another." Then we get a really pretty halo and always have a friendly smile. Voilà! The measuring tape is twisted into a halo.

But we just made that up! To live before God – there is no tricking Him: The measure of faith must look different. Living before God...? Faith made to measure? It's neither easy, nor is it something that can be learned in a day. A famous commander from the Old Testament wants to show us how this works. Naaman was his name and although he lived in a pagan land where the deity Rimmon and many other gods were worshipped, the Bible tells us: *"Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master and in high favor because by him the Lord had given victory to Syria. He was a mighty man of valor..."* The man had just one flaw – he had leprosy, and the Bible explains that things were actually really bad for Naaman because at that time in the world, leprosy meant being forsaken by God and people. Leprosy was certainly no small blemish on an otherwise successful career. Nothing more needed to be added at that time – whoever had leprosy couldn't appear before God or people. No matter how creatively he could have twisted God's law, it wouldn't have been of any use because in the world at that time, if you had leprosy, you were considered unclean and separated from God – even if you were a famous army commander. How the story continues is a true story of faith and we can learn a lot from it still today. The journey of faith wasn't just unexpected, it was extremely odd. The first point of contact was, of all things, an Israelite slave girl who had probably been mistreated by Naaman's soldiers and taken away as part of the spoils of war and was now employed as an inferior slave. Naaman had to discover from this unlikely source that there was still a spark of hope because the slave girl said: *"Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."* This bit of information was enough to motivate Naaman.

However, at first, Naaman misunderstood everything. He shouldn't have gone to the king of Israel but to the prophet who spoke God's Word. Naaman didn't just misunderstand to whom he had to go, he also misunderstood what he had to do. *"So he went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing. And he brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you Naaman my servant, that you may cure him of his leprosy."* Naaman went to the highest office in Israel and really enjoyed himself. He let it all out... even to excess. But that had the exact opposite effect. Instead of being able to buy healing, his actions almost led to war. The king of Israel completely misunderstood Naaman's efforts. "He's trying to fool me," thought Israel's king. "First he comes with so much money and asks something impossible from me... and if I don't deliver... he'll kill me." The story of Naaman and the king of Israel is a story about relationships that has been repeated many times over the years. We always measure people in the way we give and take. We must be very careful that we aren't mistreated or deceived. That's why we are constantly justifying ourselves and evaluating what we're doing for others. Wars have indeed been fought over this issue throughout history. It's therefore very human that Naaman brought so much with him. He hoped to get as much back in return. But the king of Israel was appalled at the amount because Naaman unpacked all his goods at the king's feet and it turned into a great big mess, a political fiasco. The king of Israel already knew that all that wealth wouldn't help him. What Naaman expected from him was too much. The king didn't have the ability and so he tore his clothes. That was a terrible insult to Naaman. The king's action and this massive failure could have led immediately to war. Although he may have overreacted, the king of Israel was right. *"Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?"* The king of Israel was right – Naaman just went to the wrong address. We also often do this. We frequently look for help. There is no lack of eagerness in seeking help, it's just that we look for it in the wrong place and our good deeds are useless, just like Naaman's gold – this all means absolutely nothing before God. We could buy many things but not our life. Naaman had to pack up his things again and go home. But the story isn't even close to being finished. A message from Elisha changed everything. God didn't let Naaman down. Elisha did what prophets do – he spoke the truth which was: God can do what people can't do. Once again, Naaman was filled with hope. He started out again, this time to the correct address, to the real prophet, Elisha. However, now came Naaman's second round of disappointment. Naaman expected a red carpet to be rolled out for him in front of Elisha's house and as well as a welcoming committee and one or two praises to be sung about the glory of the Syrian king. That was customary in those days. Instead, Elisha didn't even leave the

house. He just sent a messenger. What Elisha did was very wise. Naaman finally had to learn who he was dealing with. It was about the living God and no other. When we talk about faith, it is the exact same thing. No one can acquire faith for themselves or learn it or be trained to believe and because faith is a matter of God, it cannot be measured.

Naaman was to be led to this living God so all human obstacles had to be removed. Not only did he not get to see Elisha at all, but Elisha also put the cherry on top of the Israelite king's insult by telling Naaman to go and bathe, and not just anywhere, but in the puddle of dirt called the Jordan! What's interesting about this little encounter, both Elisha and Naaman are supposed to submerge themselves – Elisha in his little room and Naaman in the Jordan. There should be only one thing remaining: God. Martin Luther said that nothing is done with our own works, or in the words of the explanation of the third article of the Creed: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ..." Only God's work remains and that is precisely what Naaman is supposed to learn. Naaman should learn that he should let God be God, even if he can't understand everything about Him.

All I can say is that faith doesn't happen overnight because Naaman was still a long way from accepting the prophet's instruction as God's word – "this thing about bathing seven times in the Jordan river is just too crazy. There are so many rivers in Syria," Naaman stubbornly argued. "And furthermore, they are cleaner than any river in Israel." Naaman's first reaction is completely understandable. He wants healing... but not like that. He angrily turns his caravan around again and disappears in a huge cloud of dust. But Naaman had one advantage from the beginning: he listened to his servants. As Naaman is leaving, it almost sounds like he is in a democracy because one of his servants gave Naaman something to think about: "If Elisha had wanted something really big from you, you would have done it, wouldn't you?" That was a rhetorical question because in the back of his caravan was all the gold and silver. He would certainly have wanted to pay much more than that. Perhaps bathing in the Jordan river seven times was such a hurdle to him because it was too simple. Naaman was expected to pay something very different than gold or silver. The currency with which he now had to pay was his own body. He had to get off his high horse and immerse himself seven times in a dirty river. What humiliation! He had to go against his own feelings and emotions. Without faith, no one would do what this Naaman did. In this respect, we learn in the deepest sense what faith actually is. Our efforts don't mean anything. The things we use to justify ourselves don't matter either. What we claim to be the measure of faith matters even less... Our whole selves must be completely submerged. Naaman had to do it seven times. It's the same for us: water was poured onto our heads three times - "baptized in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." That means immersed in God, belonging entirely to God. What started with Naaman at the Jordan, begins for us in baptism. But it goes on.

Naaman finally understood it. Getting out of the water, he stood there covered from head to toe in Israelite river muck. But underneath the mud was clean skin like that of a baby. He was healed! What an exciting day. Now he wanted to give even more. He wanted to leave all the gold and silver with Elisha. But Elisha remained stubborn. What was grace beforehand continued to be grace afterwards. Naaman's efforts were all for naught. In the end, Elisha had to emphasize it again – the measure that people devise to achieve the things of God is always too little. To live before God is higher, deeper, and broader than we humans can imagine. And yet this story ends with a pile of earth that Naaman wanted to carry back to Syria, a bit of earth as a reminder of what he learned about faith. In the end, Naaman also became like this sand from Israel. He disappeared into nothingness just like when he washed himself in the river – what remained is faith in God. Two mule loads of earth should also be a sign for us. The bottom line is that with everything that we can do or achieve on earth, all that remains is the same: a bunch of dirt. Even through this we learn something about faith. Psalm 103 says: *"As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children..."* (Psalm 103:15-17) Go in peace. Elisha would perhaps still smile wearily over the millennia but would still say: go in peace. And the school of faith continues. Amen.