

## **“The Ripple Effect”**

June 11, 2017

*Faith of Our Mothers* series – Trinity Sunday – Confirmation Sunday

It doesn't escape me that as we're coming to the end of this series on the faith of some lesser known women in the Old Testament, the film *Wonder Woman* is taking the world by storm, shattering all kinds of box office records, and creating lots of buzz around the history of how the character came to be. Our confirmands and I started our journey together seeing the film *Hidden Figures*, and maybe *Wonder Woman* will be a fitting conclusion.

Perhaps this young servant girl doesn't fit the “heroine” mold for her time, but she certainly challenges us to consider what it means to live the faith we claim. Can you imagine it? Remember: she's a slave - a part of the spoils of war in the time when the Kingdom of Israel is up against many outside enemies. And Naaman is one of those enemies.

We'll get to the prophet Elisha, but he's called to be a prophet of God around 850-800 BCE, right after the prophet Elijah. He has a reputation that reaches far - far enough that this young girl knows who he is and believes that God is at work in him to bring healing. What's interesting is that she's willing to believe that God's healing isn't limited to just “her” people.

Naaman is a commander in the enemy's army. He's the “hero” type - the powerful, strong, courageous, and respected leader. He has resources, and he also has leprosy. This young woman is the servant of his wife. She has no power, no prestige, no authority. But what she has is a deep faith in the power of God to bring healing.

It's interesting that all of this converges as we're celebrating confirmation - a time when these young women confirm - make firm - the grace of God that was celebrated at their baptism. This is a big deal, a big decision, and one that they don't take lightly. I've been blessed to walk with them as a part of a larger team of youth group leaders, Sunday School teachers, camp counselors, and church family who have supported and encouraged them. The need for our support and encouragement doesn't end today, but it changes.

They're claiming faith in Jesus Christ for themselves. They're standing in front of this congregation and professing their faith. They're asking us to be a part of helping them to live faithfully. Friends, this is a big deal and a cause for celebration. I know that technically Pentecost was last Sunday, but it seems fitting to have those images of wind, fire, and a dove still here as Sam, Skylar, and Ana - Spirit-filled young women - take this step in faith and trust in God.

It seems this young servant girl was filled with the Spirit, too. We don't know her name, but we know that she's kind and compassionate. We know that Naaman's wife listened to her and shared what she said, and it went all the way to the king! How many times are we listening well - even to the voices of those who don't have a lot of power, even to the young voices around us, even to those whose thoughts we might discount so easily?

I'm still amazed that they listened, but even more amazed that she was gutsy enough to share her faith - because remember that Naaman and his family weren't Israelites. They were considered pagans. She could've easily kept quiet about the potential for healing. She could've kept that good news - that possibility - to herself and never shared it. But she didn't.

And that small act of compassion was all that it took. It was that one moment of sharing the truth that she knew in her heart that eventually made a difference in Naaman's life - and my guess is that it spread from Naaman to others, too. Because of her, others believed in God.

She's an evangelist. I know it's a word we might shy away from, but an evangelist is someone who shares good news. That's a call that all of us have. And she becomes part of this story of healing - a miracle that God works in Naaman's life!

Who knows how God will work to make you and me a channel of a miracle? We may shy away from talking miracles, but they happen every day. God's grace is moving every day - in the big things and the small things.

The ripple effect is real. It's real with the good that can happen when we live our faith. We know that the whole "pay it forward" movement changes lives. We know that small acts of kindness, simple acts of grace, and unassuming gestures of help can change the game.

And we know it's just as real with the negative. Cruelty, hurtful words, mean-spirited remarks, and all of the "-isms" that we seek to get rid of have just as much potential to destroy. The ripples we create can build the Kingdom of God right here and now, or they can make it much harder to see and experience. As these three confirm their faith, we all renew our commitment to fight against all that feeds hatred, despair, and hopelessness. We seek to be defined by the faith that God gives us, the hope we have in God, and the love of God we see in Jesus - the greatest gift of all.

And here's the thing: this young servant girl seems to be more aware of God's presence and power than anyone else. She seems to have this deep faith and trust in what God can do - even more than the kings! There's a sense of awe and wonder at the possibilities of what God can do, and a sense of humility. She's humble and faithful.

Naaman comes to faith eventually, but not until he experiences healing. He's ready to pay for whatever is needed. He's proud, and he expects that this prophet of God, Elisha, will do what needs to be done, especially as he brings all kinds of payment. But Elisha surprises him – not even coming to him directly. “Go, bathe in the muddy Jordan.”

You can picture Naaman, can't you? “That's it? Wash in the river? I could've done that at home. If it's as simple as washing in a river, this is a joke!” And notice who convinces Naaman to listen. Again, it's his servants who encourage him to go to the Jordan and wash even though it seems too simple, even though it's not difficult or dangerous as he expected.

Have you ever seen the T.V. show *Undercover Boss*? It's a reality show where a company owner goes incognito in order to get a better sense of how their company is run. Sometimes they see personnel issues that need to be addressed, and many times the owner comes away with a new appreciation for the work that the employees do - the day-to-day commitment to making the company run smoothly. They develop a greater sense of humility and deeper connection with others.

I think that's what happened to Naaman - and what happens to us - when we have the moments of transformation. Maybe that's your experience of coming to Christ - a moment when you realized that there wasn't a way to control God's grace - just an opportunity to accept it. It's interesting that Naaman doesn't have to confess that God is the Lord before he is healed. He comes to faith in the God of Israel after his healing. Regardless of social status or life station, God calls us humility and obedience. It doesn't matter how much or how little we have. What matters is our willingness to follow.

It's worth noting that Jesus recalls the healing of Naaman when he speaks to the crowds in Luke's Gospel – reminding them (and us) that we can't box God into our own ideas or expectations – usually God will blow them apart. God is God; we are not. We can't manipulate God. God isn't moved by egos or pride. God is concerned about our hearts.

God isn't bound by the boundaries we create – borders or social status or anything else. This little girl and the other servants knew that! God is the One who heals – and not for money or because of power. God heals because God is gracious.

Someone wrote, “Salvation comes mysteriously when we submit to God's script and not our own.” That's a powerful reminder. Sometimes I want to write the script of how God should work, whom God should care about, where God is working, but it's not mine to write. This young servant girl challenges us to see beyond the boundaries we draw – sometimes invisible, but always there.

There's another writer who says that living as a follower of Jesus Christ means "living by God's surprises." If we're honest, that's a very true statement. We've been surprised by God more times that we can count - sometimes convicted of our own short-sightedness, sometimes overjoyed by how God shows up when we didn't expect it, and maybe even amazed at how those small things can make such a difference.

Sam, Skylar, and Ana, thanks for reminding me of the passion and faith that we're always called to have - no matter our age. May your faith and our faith continue to send ripples of grace and love, and may you live by God's surprises.

Thanks be to God! AMEN.