

Elisha: No Strings Attached

Dr. Jay Howell

2 Kings 5:1-19

October 22, 2023

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Last week, we saw how Elisha's relationship with a woman from the town of Shunam served as the foundation for healing and generosity in two directions, not just one, and about how mission is inherently relational, not transactional.

This week, we find Elisha operating in the world of kings and generals, and we see just how powerful an impact can be had through a sign of uncommon grace. Let's go to God's Word together.

2 Kings 5:1-19. *Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from a skin disease. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his skin disease." So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, "Go, then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel."*

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his skin disease." When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his skin disease? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for

me he would surely come out and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God and would wave his hand over the spot and cure the skin disease! 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?" He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant." But he said, "As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!" He urged him to accept, but he refused. Then Naaman said, "If not, please let two mule loads of earth be given to your servant, for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the Lord. But may the Lord pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the Lord pardon your servant on this one count." He said to him, "Go in peace."

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God of Grace and Power, we thank you for this testimony of just how far reaching your grace can be, beyond nations, beyond armies, beyond prejudice and hate. We pray by your Spirit for this Word of grace to permeate us, transform us, and send us out. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Well, the fact that Naaman was getting any attention whatsoever is a powerful thing to begin with. Think about how he was described. This was the commander of a foreign army, and not just a foreign army, say maybe a kingdom that Israel had had friendly relations with, but instead a rival, an enemy, a kingdom that in this time period would regularly raid and at times even take parts of Israelite cities.

The kingdom of Aram wasn't on the same scale as some of those big empires that would sweep through Israel, like Assyria or Babylon or Persia, but they were a regional rival. And more to the point, Naaman was its army's commander and was directly responsible for attacks and victories over Israel. This was an enemy.

It was almost poetic, then, perhaps from an Israelite perspective, that this "great man," this "mighty warrior," suffered from leprosy, from some kind of skin disease.

It's pointedly timely, in a horrific way, that the way Naaman's story gets going is through the testimony of a young girl whose abduction he was responsible for. An Aramean raid had taken

a young Israelite girl captive, and that girl came to serve in Naaman's household. That girl learned of Naaman's condition, and at a point when any rational response would've said, "Good. You deserve this horrible disease. Hope it's painful," this girl remembers a prophet from her home, and tells Naaman's wife that he should seek out Elisha. Naaman, presumably having sought out some kind of remedy through his own country's healers, is desperate and through the Aramean king, reaches out to this prophet.

Think about what this would mean in today's terms, in very recent, horrific terms. Imagine a leader, a commander within Hamas who was responsible for coordinating the raids and attacks in Israel, including kidnappings and the holding of hostages, being stricken with cancer, and then seeking out treatment from an Israelite doctor. That's what we're talking about here. Naaman is an enemy. What would be a reasonable, even justifiable response here? Well to say, uh, no. There weren't the Geneva Conventions then, and even if there were, this isn't a battlefield wound, or a combat medic treating all soldiers, friendly and enemy alike. It's a chronic condition. Plus, we might be tempted to think, if somehow this man is healed, just how many more Israelites will die because this man lives longer commanding an enemy army?

So many ethical minefields here. And I know we've got a lot of physicians and nurses among us, so this may not be an entirely theoretical exercise. Some of you may have faced some horrifying dilemma like this. What's the scenario they give you in school? There's a horrible wreck caused by a DUI—and tragically this is not far off from something our neighborhood suffered not long ago—but two people are brought into the ER with life-threatening injuries. The first is the impaired driver who caused the wreck; the second is a child in the other car. You're the doctor. Do you treat them differently? We know what the right answer is, but how would we feel in that position? Even though we know what answer is, there's also some lingering sense that maybe we let someone who did wrong get their just desserts simply by not intervening.

That's something like what it meant for Naaman to be seeking healing in Israel. It's not the same as an emergency room; he's not bleeding to death, but should he, an enemy, be given that healing? We know the right answer, but how many of us would really want to give it?

In fact, the more I think about it, the more I resonate with the response from the Israelite king. He says, "Am I God, to give death or life...? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." Feels like he's the only one responding with some kind of a predictable reaction: is this some trick, is he trying to pick a fight? But then word gets to Elisha about the king's response, and he sends word to the king, "Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." This healing is for a purpose: that this enemy commander might know that God is at work in Israel, and that he might know just how God is at work.

Naaman goes to Elisha's house, but in a somewhat amusing scene, he shows up with all these horses and chariots, these signs of his power and military might. "I might be coming hat in hand as far this leprosy thing, but I've still got all these horses at my beckon call." (The things we do to make it look like we're somehow still in control especially when we feel helpless.) And the funny thing? Elisha doesn't even go out to him. He can read through that display. He sends a messenger instead, saying, "Go wash in the Jordan seven times."

Naaman's taken aback, angered by this. Angered that this prophet would not deign to even pay the courtesy to greet him in person—and he might have a point there. Angered that there's some implication that the River Jordan is somehow more better than the rivers in Damascus. Even angered that the instructions were not more challenging, something his servants point out.

But he ends up going to the river, washes seven times, and he was clean. After that, he tries to offer a present, more like trying to offer payment if you ask me, but Elisha refuses. Naaman then declares that even as he went back to his home, immersed in his home culture and his home religion, he would no longer give sacrifice to any god except the Lord.

Think of the ways we respond to grace, to mercy. Does our pride get in the way? Do we cling to control? Would we be more comfortable if it were something we could work for or strive for, something that we felt we achieved on our own rather than by another's kindness? Do we wish it were something we could pay for, even, because still we might consider it to be some kind of a fair transaction, rather than a gift freely given, unearned, unmerited? When we are shown mercy, are we resistant to it? Instead, what would lead us to embrace a way not of earning the grace of God, but rather extending the grace of God?

That's what Elisha's interested in doing. He's not interested in accommodating what would make Naaman more comfortable, or distorting grace to fit his preferences for it. He's more interested in showing this man that there was a prophet in Israel, that God was at work in Israel. He's more interested in showing the way God was at work in Israel, and that was a way of healing, of grace, of an unearned gift freely given, to an enemy even, without expectation of anything in repayment of it.

That's how Elisha saw God at work, and that's what he wanted to show Naaman: that there was a God in Israel who was mighty, yes, mighty to heal, mighty to save, but the power came in mercy.

Throughout this series we've been using as our Affirmation of Faith a portion of the Confession of 1967, one of the confessions of our church, and you might have noted some of the phrasing in it. "To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as God's reconciling community." We are sent to extend the same grace, the same healing, that God has shown us.

That's what Elisha is doing. And I wonder what mercies emerged as a result of the grace shown to Naaman, to this enemy.

On one hand, it's not like the conflict between Aram and Israel magically ceased. I mean, come on, if you just read the very next chapter, there's more violence between the two kingdoms again. But who knows what fruit of grace might grow in a harsh world if only the seeds are planted?

Nearly 80 years ago, an Iowa farm boy named Elmer Richardson was marching across France into Belgium and Germany. It was late 1944, and if we have any World War II scholars among us, you know from the location and the timeline what's about to happen.

While out on patrol one day, Richardson was ambushed by German soldiers. This was part of a larger counteroffensive that came to be known as the Battle of the Bulge. In the skirmish, Richardson was shot in the gut, captured, and taken to a nearby church converted into a field hospital.

It was there that he just assumed that he would succumb to his injuries. Sure there were international conventions about treatment of wounded enemy soldiers, but how much could he rely on those?

He was in bad shape too from the gunshot. He should have died.

But he ended up on the operating table of a German doctor named Ludwig Gruber. Gruber's commanding officers told him that this was an enemy combatant, which was true, and therefore not warranting the sort of extensive attention required to repair the damage caused by the gunshot. How many other soldiers, or more to the point, how many other *German* soldiers could be treated in the same amount of time?

But Gruber ignored them. He spent hours in surgery on Richardson and saved his life.

They struck up a friendship during Richardson's recovery, even exchanging addresses to correspond after the war.

When Richardson was slated to be transferred to a POW camp, it was Gruber who fought to keep him there at the hospital for additional time to heal.

It was in that extra time that an American Army captain came under truce to the hospital and met with Richardson, sharing the plan to bomb the area because military vehicles were using the hospital as a field headquarters. Richardson intervened, negotiating with the captain and the Germans that if the military vehicles were directed elsewhere, the area would not be bombed.

Gruber healed and saved Richardson's life. And Richardson in turn, more than likely, saved his.

Many years later, long after the war had ended and Gruber and Richardson both had returned to their countries, their homes, even long after both men themselves had died after enjoying long lives after the war, Richardson's son Steve retraced his father's steps in the war, and tried to connect with the descendants of the enemy doctor who had saved his father's life.

He discovered that Gruber himself had had three sons, two of whom themselves became doctors in fact. And while retracing his father's steps, Steve Richardson met with Gruber's sons.

They spoke for nine hours.

Gruber's sons never knew of this mercy their father had shown to an enemy many years before. And Steve Richardson later said he felt like he gained three brothers.

It's not like the war magically ceased the day Gruber and Richardson parted ways. Thousands more died every day until the war ended. But you start doing the math at some point. In the face of all the death and violence and hostility, how many lives were born into existence that otherwise would not have, all because of the grace, the uncommon kindness shown by this German doctor toward an enemy? And many years later, how many wounds and illnesses were healed, how many lives were saved by the medical work of his sons, who were alive because this enemy soldier had intervened on an enemy's behalf? How much more light came into the world through the uncommon kindness shared between enemies?

The world is harsh. The world is often cruel. We have no shortage of histories and headlines that remind us of this every day. And at every turn there's the temptation to look out for yourself, to look out for your own, leading us to say "We're only going to extend love and grace to you if you look like ____, or if you live like ____, or if you're on our team and not on their team. Otherwise, if we're going to do anything for you, we're going to expect some things in return. You're going to have to become like us." How tempting would it have been, after all, for Elisha to say to Naaman, "I'll heal you, but first you have to renounce your country and swear faith in the God of Israel"? That's what we're tempted to say. That's what the world drives us to say.

But that's not the kind of grace that's been shown to us. And it's not the grace we've been sent out to share. And in a harsh, cruel world, what grace, what further mercies might come to light by more acts of uncommon kindness? This is how the Lord has chosen to work. This is the mission of mercy entrusted to those who follow his Son. What uncommon grace could you show today?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for

me he would surely come out and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God and would wave his hand over the spot and cure the skin disease! 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?" He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant." But he said, "As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!" He urged him to accept, but he refused. Then Naaman said, "If not, please let two mule loads of earth be given to your servant, for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the Lord. But may the Lord pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the Lord pardon your servant on this one count." He said to him, "Go in peace."

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The kingdom of Aram wasn't on the same scale as some of those big empires that would sweep through Israel, like Assyria or Babylon or Persia, but they were a regional rival. And more to the point, Naaman was its army's commander and was directly responsible for attacks and victories over Israel. This was an enemy.

It was almost poetic, then, perhaps from an Israelite perspective, that this "great man," this "mighty warrior," suffered from leprosy, from some kind of skin disease.

It's pointedly timely, in a horrific way, that the way Naaman's story gets going is through the testimony of a young girl whose abduction he was responsible for. An Aramean raid had taken

a young Israelite girl captive, and that girl came to serve in Naaman's household. That girl learned of Naaman's condition, and at a point when any rational response would've said, "Good. You deserve this horrible disease. Hope it's painful," this girl remembers a prophet from her home, and tells Naaman's wife that he should seek out Elisha. Naaman, presumably having sought out some kind of remedy through his own country's healers, is desperate and through the Aramean king, reaches out to this prophet.

Think about what this would mean in today's terms, in very recent, horrific terms. Imagine a leader, a commander within Hamas who was responsible for coordinating the raids and attacks in Israel, including kidnappings and the holding of hostages, being stricken with cancer, and then seeking out treatment from an Israelite doctor. That's what we're talking about here. Naaman is an enemy. What would be a reasonable, even justifiable response here? Well to say, uh, no. There weren't the Geneva Conventions then, and even if there were, this isn't a battlefield wound, or a combat medic treating all soldiers, friendly and enemy alike. It's a chronic condition. Plus, we might be tempted to think, if somehow this man is healed, just how many more Israelites will die because this man lives longer commanding an enemy army?

So many ethical minefields here. And I know we've got a lot of physicians and nurses among us, so this may not be an entirely theoretical exercise. Some of you may have faced some horrifying dilemma like this. What's the scenario they give you in school? There's a horrible wreck caused by a DUI—and tragically this is not far off from something our neighborhood suffered not long ago—but two people are brought into the ER with life-threatening injuries. The first is the impaired driver who caused the wreck; the second is a child in the other car. You're the doctor. Do you treat them differently? We know what the right answer is, but how would we feel in that position? Even though we know what answer is, there's also some lingering sense that maybe we let someone who did wrong get their just desserts simply by not intervening.

That's something like what it meant for Naaman to be seeking healing in Israel. It's not the same as an emergency room; he's not bleeding to death, but should he, an enemy, be given that healing? We know the right answer, but how many of us would really want to give it?

In fact, the more I think about it, the more I resonate with the response from the Israelite king. He says, "Am I God, to give death or life...? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." Feels like he's the only one responding with some kind of a predictable reaction: is this some trick, is he trying to pick a fight? But then word gets to Elisha about the king's response, and he sends word to the king, "Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." This healing is for a purpose: that this enemy commander might know that God is at work in Israel, and that he might know just how God is at work.

Naaman goes to Elisha's house, but in a somewhat amusing scene, he shows up with all these horses and chariots, these signs of his power and military might. "I might be coming hat in hand as far this leprosy thing, but I've still got all these horses at my beckon call." (The things we do to make it look like we're somehow still in control especially when we feel helpless.) And the funny thing? Elisha doesn't even go out to him. He can read through that display. He sends a messenger instead, saying, "Go wash in the Jordan seven times."

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But he ends up going to the river, washes seven times, and he was clean. After that, he tries to offer a present, more like trying to offer payment if you ask me, but Elisha refuses. Naaman then declares that even as he went back to his home, immersed in his home culture and his home religion, he would no longer give sacrifice to any god except the Lord.

Think of the ways we respond to grace, to mercy. Does our pride get in the way? Do we cling to control? Would we be more comfortable if it were something we could work for or strive for, something that we felt we achieved on our own rather than by another's kindness? Do we wish it were something we could pay for, even, because still we might consider it to be some kind of a fair transaction, rather than a gift freely given, unearned, unmerited? When we are shown mercy, are we resistant to it? Instead, what would lead us to embrace a way not of earning the grace of God, but rather extending the grace of God?

That's what Elisha's interested in doing. He's not interested in accommodating what would make Naaman more comfortable, or distorting grace to fit his preferences for it. He's more interested in showing this man that there was a prophet in Israel, that God was at work in Israel. He's more interested in showing the way God was at work in Israel, and that was a way of healing, of grace, of an unearned gift freely given, to an enemy even, without expectation of anything in repayment of it.

That's how Elisha saw God at work, and that's what he wanted to show Naaman: that there was a God in Israel who was mighty, yes, mighty to heal, mighty to save, but the power came in mercy.

Throughout this series we've been using as our Affirmation of Faith a portion of the Confession of 1967, one of the confessions of our church, and you might have noted some of the phrasing in it. "To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as God's reconciling community." We are sent to extend the same grace, the same healing, that God has shown us.

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On one hand, it's not like the conflict between Aram and Israel magically ceased. I mean, come on, if you just read the very next chapter, there's more violence between the two kingdoms again. But who knows what fruit of grace might grow in a harsh world if only the seeds are planted?

Nearly 80 years ago, an Iowa farm boy named Elmer Richardson was marching across France into Belgium and Germany. It was late 1944, and if we have any World War II scholars among us, you know from the location and the timeline what's about to happen.

While out on patrol one day, Richardson was ambushed by German soldiers. This was part of a larger counteroffensive that came to be known as the Battle of the Bulge. In the skirmish, Richardson was shot in the gut, captured, and taken to a nearby church converted into a field hospital.

It was there that he just assumed that he would succumb to his injuries. Sure there were international conventions about treatment of wounded enemy soldiers, but how much could he rely on those?

He was in bad shape too from the gunshot. He should have died.

But he ended up on the operating table of a German doctor named Ludwig Gruber. Gruber's commanding officers told him that this was an enemy combatant, which was true, and therefore not warranting the sort of extensive attention required to repair the damage caused by the gunshot. How many other soldiers, or more to the point, how many other *German* soldiers could be treated in the same amount of time?

But Gruber ignored them. He spent hours in surgery on Richardson and saved his life.

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When Richardson was slated to be transferred to a POW camp, it was Gruber who fought to keep him there at the hospital for additional time to heal.

It was in that extra time that an American Army captain came under truce to the hospital and met with Richardson, sharing the plan to bomb the area because military vehicles were using the hospital as a field headquarters. Richardson intervened, negotiating with the captain and the Germans that if the military vehicles were directed elsewhere, the area would not be bombed.

Gruber healed and saved Richardson's life. And Richardson in turn, more than likely, saved his.

Many years later, long after the war had ended and Gruber and Richardson both had returned to their countries, their homes, even long after both men themselves had died after enjoying long lives after the war, Richardson's son Steve retraced his father's steps in the war, and tried to connect with the descendants of the enemy doctor who had saved his father's life.

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It's not like the war magically ceased the day Gruber and Richardson parted ways. Thousands more died every day until the war ended. But you start doing the math at some point. In the face of all the death and violence and hostility, how many lives were born into existence that otherwise would not have, all because of the grace, the uncommon kindness shown by this German doctor toward an enemy? And many years later, how many wounds and illnesses were healed, how many lives were saved by the medical work of his sons, who were alive because this enemy soldier had intervened on an enemy's behalf? How much more light came into the world through the uncommon kindness shared between enemies?

The world is harsh. The world is often cruel. We have no shortage of histories and headlines that remind us of this every day. And at every turn there's the temptation to look out for yourself, to look out for your own, leading us to say "We're only going to extend love and grace to you if you look like ____, or if you live like ____, or if you're on our team and not on their team. Otherwise, if we're going to do anything for you, we're going to expect some things in return. You're going to have to become like us." How tempting would it have been, after all, for Elisha to say to Naaman, "I'll heal you, but first you have to renounce your country and swear faith in the God of Israel"? That's what we're tempted to say. That's what the world drives us to say.

But that's not the kind of grace that's been shown to us. And it's not the grace we've been sent out to share. And in a harsh, cruel world, what grace, what further mercies might come to light by more acts of uncommon kindness? This is how the Lord has chosen to work. This is the mission of mercy entrusted to those who follow his Son. What uncommon grace could you show today?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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2 Kings 5:1-19

October 22, 2023

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me he would surely come out and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God and would wave his hand over the spot and cure the skin disease! 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?" He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant." But he said, "As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!" He urged him to accept, but he refused. Then Naaman said, "If not, please let two mule loads of earth be given to your servant, for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the Lord. But may the Lord pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the Lord pardon your servant on this one count." He said to him, "Go in peace."

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God of Grace and Power, we thank you for this testimony of just how far reaching your grace can be, beyond nations, beyond armies, beyond prejudice and hate. We pray by your Spirit for this Word of grace to permeate us, transform us, and send us out. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

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The kingdom of Aram wasn't on the same scale as some of those big empires that would sweep through Israel, like Assyria or Babylon or Persia, but they were a regional rival. And more to the point, Naaman was its army's commander and was directly responsible for attacks and victories over Israel. This was an enemy.

It was almost poetic, then, perhaps from an Israelite perspective, that this "great man," this "mighty warrior," suffered from leprosy, from some kind of skin disease.

It's pointedly timely, in a horrific way, that the way Naaman's story gets going is through the testimony of a young girl whose abduction he was responsible for. An Aramean raid had taken

a young Israelite girl captive, and that girl came to serve in Naaman's household. That girl learned of Naaman's condition, and at a point when any rational response would've said, "Good. You deserve this horrible disease. Hope it's painful," this girl remembers a prophet from her home, and tells Naaman's wife that he should seek out Elisha. Naaman, presumably having sought out some kind of remedy through his own country's healers, is desperate and through the Aramean king, reaches out to this prophet.

Think about what this would mean in today's terms, in very recent, horrific terms. Imagine a leader, a commander within Hamas who was responsible for coordinating the raids and attacks in Israel, including kidnappings and the holding of hostages, being stricken with cancer, and then seeking out treatment from an Israelite doctor. That's what we're talking about here. Naaman is an enemy. What would be a reasonable, even justifiable response here? Well to say, uh, no. There weren't the Geneva Conventions then, and even if there were, this isn't a battlefield wound, or a combat medic treating all soldiers, friendly and enemy alike. It's a chronic condition. Plus, we might be tempted to think, if somehow this man is healed, just how many more Israelites will die because this man lives longer commanding an enemy army?

So many ethical minefields here. And I know we've got a lot of physicians and nurses among us, so this may not be an entirely theoretical exercise. Some of you may have faced some horrifying dilemma like this. What's the scenario they give you in school? There's a horrible wreck caused by a DUI—and tragically this is not far off from something our neighborhood suffered not long ago—but two people are brought into the ER with life-threatening injuries. The first is the impaired driver who caused the wreck; the second is a child in the other car. You're the doctor. Do you treat them differently? We know what the right answer is, but how would we feel in that position? Even though we know what answer is, there's also some lingering sense that maybe we let someone who did wrong get their just desserts simply by not intervening.

That's something like what it meant for Naaman to be seeking healing in Israel. It's not the same as an emergency room; he's not bleeding to death, but should he, an enemy, be given that healing? We know the right answer, but how many of us would really want to give it?

In fact, the more I think about it, the more I resonate with the response from the Israelite king. He says, "Am I God, to give death or life...? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." Feels like he's the only one responding with some kind of a predictable reaction: is this some trick, is he trying to pick a fight? But then word gets to Elisha about the king's response, and he sends word to the king, "Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." This healing is for a purpose: that this enemy commander might know that God is at work in Israel, and that he might know just how God is at work.

Naaman goes to Elisha's house, but in a somewhat amusing scene, he shows up with all these horses and chariots, these signs of his power and military might. "I might be coming hat in hand as far this leprosy thing, but I've still got all these horses at my beckon call." (The things we do to make it look like we're somehow still in control especially when we feel helpless.) And the funny thing? Elisha doesn't even go out to him. He can read through that display. He sends a messenger instead, saying, "Go wash in the Jordan seven times."

Naaman's taken aback, angered by this. Angered that this prophet would not deign to even pay the courtesy to greet him in person—and he might have a point there. Angered that there's some implication that the River Jordan is somehow more better than the rivers in Damascus. Even angered that the instructions were not more challenging, something his servants point out.

But he ends up going to the river, washes seven times, and he was clean. After that, he tries to offer a present, more like trying to offer payment if you ask me, but Elisha refuses. Naaman then declares that even as he went back to his home, immersed in his home culture and his home religion, he would no longer give sacrifice to any god except the Lord.

Think of the ways we respond to grace, to mercy. Does our pride get in the way? Do we cling to control? Would we be more comfortable if it were something we could work for or strive for, something that we felt we achieved on our own rather than by another's kindness? Do we wish it were something we could pay for, even, because still we might consider it to be some kind of a fair transaction, rather than a gift freely given, unearned, unmerited? When we are shown mercy, are we resistant to it? Instead, what would lead us to embrace a way not of earning the grace of God, but rather extending the grace of God?

That's what Elisha's interested in doing. He's not interested in accommodating what would make Naaman more comfortable, or distorting grace to fit his preferences for it. He's more interested in showing this man that there was a prophet in Israel, that God was at work in Israel. He's more interested in showing the way God was at work in Israel, and that was a way of healing, of grace, of an unearned gift freely given, to an enemy even, without expectation of anything in repayment of it.

That's how Elisha saw God at work, and that's what he wanted to show Naaman: that there was a God in Israel who was mighty, yes, mighty to heal, mighty to save, but the power came in mercy.

Throughout this series we've been using as our Affirmation of Faith a portion of the Confession of 1967, one of the confessions of our church, and you might have noted some of the phrasing in it. "To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as God's reconciling community." We are sent to extend the same grace, the same healing, that God has shown us.

That's what Elisha is doing. And I wonder what mercies emerged as a result of the grace shown to Naaman, to this enemy.

On one hand, it's not like the conflict between Aram and Israel magically ceased. I mean, come on, if you just read the very next chapter, there's more violence between the two kingdoms again. But who knows what fruit of grace might grow in a harsh world if only the seeds are planted?

Nearly 80 years ago, an Iowa farm boy named Elmer Richardson was marching across France into Belgium and Germany. It was late 1944, and if we have any World War II scholars among us, you know from the location and the timeline what's about to happen.

While out on patrol one day, Richardson was ambushed by German soldiers. This was part of a larger counteroffensive that came to be known as the Battle of the Bulge. In the skirmish, Richardson was shot in the gut, captured, and taken to a nearby church converted into a field hospital.

It was there that he just assumed that he would succumb to his injuries. Sure there were international conventions about treatment of wounded enemy soldiers, but how much could he rely on those?

He was in bad shape too from the gunshot. He should have died.

But he ended up on the operating table of a German doctor named Ludwig Gruber. Gruber's commanding officers told him that this was an enemy combatant, which was true, and therefore not warranting the sort of extensive attention required to repair the damage caused by the gunshot. How many other soldiers, or more to the point, how many other *German* soldiers could be treated in the same amount of time?

But Gruber ignored them. He spent hours in surgery on Richardson and saved his life.

They struck up a friendship during Richardson's recovery, even exchanging addresses to correspond after the war.

When Richardson was slated to be transferred to a POW camp, it was Gruber who fought to keep him there at the hospital for additional time to heal.

It was in that extra time that an American Army captain came under truce to the hospital and met with Richardson, sharing the plan to bomb the area because military vehicles were using the hospital as a field headquarters. Richardson intervened, negotiating with the captain and the Germans that if the military vehicles were directed elsewhere, the area would not be bombed.

Gruber healed and saved Richardson's life. And Richardson in turn, more than likely, saved his.

Many years later, long after the war had ended and Gruber and Richardson both had returned to their countries, their homes, even long after both men themselves had died after enjoying long lives after the war, Richardson's son Steve retraced his father's steps in the war, and tried to connect with the descendants of the enemy doctor who had saved his father's life.

He discovered that Gruber himself had had three sons, two of whom themselves became doctors in fact. And while retracing his father's steps, Steve Richardson met with Gruber's sons.

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Gruber's sons never knew of this mercy their father had shown to an enemy many years before. And Steve Richardson later said he felt like he gained three brothers.

It's not like the war magically ceased the day Gruber and Richardson parted ways. Thousands more died every day until the war ended. But you start doing the math at some point. In the face of all the death and violence and hostility, how many lives were born into existence that otherwise would not have, all because of the grace, the uncommon kindness shown by this German doctor toward an enemy? And many years later, how many wounds and illnesses were healed, how many lives were saved by the medical work of his sons, who were alive because this enemy soldier had intervened on an enemy's behalf? How much more light came into the world through the uncommon kindness shared between enemies?

The world is harsh. The world is often cruel. We have no shortage of histories and headlines that remind us of this every day. And at every turn there's the temptation to look out for yourself, to look out for your own, leading us to say "We're only going to extend love and grace to you if you look like ____, or if you live like ____, or if you're on our team and not on their team. Otherwise, if we're going to do anything for you, we're going to expect some things in return. You're going to have to become like us." How tempting would it have been, after all, for Elisha to say to Naaman, "I'll heal you, but first you have to renounce your country and swear faith in the God of Israel"? That's what we're tempted to say. That's what the world drives us to say.

But that's not the kind of grace that's been shown to us. And it's not the grace we've been sent out to share. And in a harsh, cruel world, what grace, what further mercies might come to light by more acts of uncommon kindness? This is how the Lord has chosen to work. This is the mission of mercy entrusted to those who follow his Son. What uncommon grace could you show today?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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2 Kings 5:1-19

October 22, 2023

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Last week, we saw how Elisha's relationship with a woman from the town of Shunam served as the foundation for healing and generosity in two directions, not just one, and about how mission is inherently relational, not transactional.

This week, we find Elisha operating in the world of kings and generals, and we see just how powerful an impact can be had through a sign of uncommon grace. Let's go to God's Word together.

2 Kings 5:1-19. *Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from a skin disease. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his skin disease." So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, "Go, then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel."*

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his skin disease." When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his skin disease? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

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Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant." But he said, "As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!" He urged him to accept, but he refused. Then Naaman said, "If not, please let two mule loads of earth be given to your servant, for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the Lord. But may the Lord pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the Lord pardon your servant on this one count." He said to him, "Go in peace."

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Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant." But he said, "As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!" He urged him to accept, but he refused. Then Naaman said, "If not, please let two mule loads of earth be given to your servant, for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the Lord. But may the Lord pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the Lord pardon your servant on this one count." He said to him, "Go in peace."

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God of Grace and Power, we thank you for this testimony of just how far reaching your grace can be, beyond nations, beyond armies, beyond prejudice and hate. We pray by your Spirit for this Word of grace to permeate us, transform us, and send us out. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Well, the fact that Naaman was getting any attention whatsoever is a powerful thing to begin with. Think about how he was described. This was the commander of a foreign army, and not just a foreign army, say maybe a kingdom that Israel had had friendly relations with, but instead a rival, an enemy, a kingdom that in this time period would regularly raid and at times even take parts of Israelite cities.

The kingdom of Aram wasn't on the same scale as some of those big empires that would sweep through Israel, like Assyria or Babylon or Persia, but they were a regional rival. And more to the point, Naaman was its army's commander and was directly responsible for attacks and victories over Israel. This was an enemy.

It was almost poetic, then, perhaps from an Israelite perspective, that this "great man," this "mighty warrior," suffered from leprosy, from some kind of skin disease.

It's pointedly timely, in a horrific way, that the way Naaman's story gets going is through the testimony of a young girl whose abduction he was responsible for. An Aramean raid had taken

a young Israelite girl captive, and that girl came to serve in Naaman's household. That girl learned of Naaman's condition, and at a point when any rational response would've said, "Good. You deserve this horrible disease. Hope it's painful," this girl remembers a prophet from her home, and tells Naaman's wife that he should seek out Elisha. Naaman, presumably having sought out some kind of remedy through his own country's healers, is desperate and through the Aramean king, reaches out to this prophet.

Think about what this would mean in today's terms, in very recent, horrific terms. Imagine a leader, a commander within Hamas who was responsible for coordinating the raids and attacks in Israel, including kidnappings and the holding of hostages, being stricken with cancer, and then seeking out treatment from an Israelite doctor. That's what we're talking about here. Naaman is an enemy. What would be a reasonable, even justifiable response here? Well to say, uh, no. There weren't the Geneva Conventions then, and even if there were, this isn't a battlefield wound, or a combat medic treating all soldiers, friendly and enemy alike. It's a chronic condition. Plus, we might be tempted to think, if somehow this man is healed, just how many more Israelites will die because this man lives longer commanding an enemy army?

So many ethical minefields here. And I know we've got a lot of physicians and nurses among us, so this may not be an entirely theoretical exercise. Some of you may have faced some horrifying dilemma like this. What's the scenario they give you in school? There's a horrible wreck caused by a DUI—and tragically this is not far off from something our neighborhood suffered not long ago—but two people are brought into the ER with life-threatening injuries. The first is the impaired driver who caused the wreck; the second is a child in the other car. You're the doctor. Do you treat them differently? We know what the right answer is, but how would we feel in that position? Even though we know what answer is, there's also some lingering sense that maybe we let someone who did wrong get their just desserts simply by not intervening.

That's something like what it meant for Naaman to be seeking healing in Israel. It's not the same as an emergency room; he's not bleeding to death, but should he, an enemy, be given that healing? We know the right answer, but how many of us would really want to give it?

In fact, the more I think about it, the more I resonate with the response from the Israelite king. He says, "Am I God, to give death or life...? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." Feels like he's the only one responding with some kind of a predictable reaction: is this some trick, is he trying to pick a fight? But then word gets to Elisha about the king's response, and he sends word to the king, "Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." This healing is for a purpose: that this enemy commander might know that God is at work in Israel, and that he might know just how God is at work.

Naaman goes to Elisha's house, but in a somewhat amusing scene, he shows up with all these horses and chariots, these signs of his power and military might. "I might be coming hat in hand as far this leprosy thing, but I've still got all these horses at my beckon call." (The things we do to make it look like we're somehow still in control especially when we feel helpless.) And the funny thing? Elisha doesn't even go out to him. He can read through that display. He sends a messenger instead, saying, "Go wash in the Jordan seven times."

Naaman's taken aback, angered by this. Angered that this prophet would not deign to even pay the courtesy to greet him in person—and he might have a point there. Angered that there's some implication that the River Jordan is somehow more better than the rivers in Damascus. Even angered that the instructions were not more challenging, something his servants point out.

But he ends up going to the river, washes seven times, and he was clean. After that, he tries to offer a present, more like trying to offer payment if you ask me, but Elisha refuses. Naaman then declares that even as he went back to his home, immersed in his home culture and his home religion, he would no longer give sacrifice to any god except the Lord.

Think of the ways we respond to grace, to mercy. Does our pride get in the way? Do we cling to control? Would we be more comfortable if it were something we could work for or strive for, something that we felt we achieved on our own rather than by another's kindness? Do we wish it were something we could pay for, even, because still we might consider it to be some kind of a fair transaction, rather than a gift freely given, unearned, unmerited? When we are shown mercy, are we resistant to it? Instead, what would lead us to embrace a way not of earning the grace of God, but rather extending the grace of God?

That's what Elisha's interested in doing. He's not interested in accommodating what would make Naaman more comfortable, or distorting grace to fit his preferences for it. He's more interested in showing this man that there was a prophet in Israel, that God was at work in Israel. He's more interested in showing the way God was at work in Israel, and that was a way of healing, of grace, of an unearned gift freely given, to an enemy even, without expectation of anything in repayment of it.

That's how Elisha saw God at work, and that's what he wanted to show Naaman: that there was a God in Israel who was mighty, yes, mighty to heal, mighty to save, but the power came in mercy.

Throughout this series we've been using as our Affirmation of Faith a portion of the Confession of 1967, one of the confessions of our church, and you might have noted some of the phrasing in it. "To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as God's reconciling community." We are sent to extend the same grace, the same healing, that God has shown us.

That's what Elisha is doing. And I wonder what mercies emerged as a result of the grace shown to Naaman, to this enemy.

On one hand, it's not like the conflict between Aram and Israel magically ceased. I mean, come on, if you just read the very next chapter, there's more violence between the two kingdoms again. But who knows what fruit of grace might grow in a harsh world if only the seeds are planted?

Nearly 80 years ago, an Iowa farm boy named Elmer Richardson was marching across France into Belgium and Germany. It was late 1944, and if we have any World War II scholars among us, you know from the location and the timeline what's about to happen.

While out on patrol one day, Richardson was ambushed by German soldiers. This was part of a larger counteroffensive that came to be known as the Battle of the Bulge. In the skirmish, Richardson was shot in the gut, captured, and taken to a nearby church converted into a field hospital.

It was there that he just assumed that he would succumb to his injuries. Sure there were international conventions about treatment of wounded enemy soldiers, but how much could he rely on those?

He was in bad shape too from the gunshot. He should have died.

But he ended up on the operating table of a German doctor named Ludwig Gruber. Gruber's commanding officers told him that this was an enemy combatant, which was true, and therefore not warranting the sort of extensive attention required to repair the damage caused by the gunshot. How many other soldiers, or more to the point, how many other *German* soldiers could be treated in the same amount of time?

But Gruber ignored them. He spent hours in surgery on Richardson and saved his life.

They struck up a friendship during Richardson's recovery, even exchanging addresses to correspond after the war.

When Richardson was slated to be transferred to a POW camp, it was Gruber who fought to keep him there at the hospital for additional time to heal.

It was in that extra time that an American Army captain came under truce to the hospital and met with Richardson, sharing the plan to bomb the area because military vehicles were using the hospital as a field headquarters. Richardson intervened, negotiating with the captain and the Germans that if the military vehicles were directed elsewhere, the area would not be bombed.

Gruber healed and saved Richardson's life. And Richardson in turn, more than likely, saved his.

Many years later, long after the war had ended and Gruber and Richardson both had returned to their countries, their homes, even long after both men themselves had died after enjoying long lives after the war, Richardson's son Steve retraced his father's steps in the war, and tried to connect with the descendants of the enemy doctor who had saved his father's life.

He discovered that Gruber himself had had three sons, two of whom themselves became doctors in fact. And while retracing his father's steps, Steve Richardson met with Gruber's sons.

They spoke for nine hours.

Gruber's sons never knew of this mercy their father had shown to an enemy many years before. And Steve Richardson later said he felt like he gained three brothers.

It's not like the war magically ceased the day Gruber and Richardson parted ways. Thousands more died every day until the war ended. But you start doing the math at some point. In the face of all the death and violence and hostility, how many lives were born into existence that otherwise would not have, all because of the grace, the uncommon kindness shown by this German doctor toward an enemy? And many years later, how many wounds and illnesses were healed, how many lives were saved by the medical work of his sons, who were alive because this enemy soldier had intervened on an enemy's behalf? How much more light came into the world through the uncommon kindness shared between enemies?

The world is harsh. The world is often cruel. We have no shortage of histories and headlines that remind us of this every day. And at every turn there's the temptation to look out for yourself, to look out for your own, leading us to say "We're only going to extend love and grace to you if you look like ____, or if you live like ____, or if you're on our team and not on their team. Otherwise, if we're going to do anything for you, we're going to expect some things in return. You're going to have to become like us." How tempting would it have been, after all, for Elisha to say to Naaman, "I'll heal you, but first you have to renounce your country and swear faith in the God of Israel"? That's what we're tempted to say. That's what the world drives us to say.

But that's not the kind of grace that's been shown to us. And it's not the grace we've been sent out to share. And in a harsh, cruel world, what grace, what further mercies might come to light by more acts of uncommon kindness? This is how the Lord has chosen to work. This is the mission of mercy entrusted to those who follow his Son. What uncommon grace could you show today?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Elisha: No Strings Attached

Dr. Jay Howell

2 Kings 5:1-19

October 22, 2023

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Last week, we saw how Elisha's relationship with a woman from the town of Shunam served as the foundation for healing and generosity in two directions, not just one, and about how mission is inherently relational, not transactional.

This week, we find Elisha operating in the world of kings and generals, and we see just how powerful an impact can be had through a sign of uncommon grace. Let's go to God's Word together.

2 Kings 5:1-19. *Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from a skin disease. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his skin disease." So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, "Go, then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel."*

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his skin disease." When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his skin disease? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for

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Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant." But he said, "As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!" He urged him to accept, but he refused. Then Naaman said, "If not, please let two mule loads of earth be given to your servant, for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the Lord. But may the Lord pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the Lord pardon your servant on this one count." He said to him, "Go in peace."

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The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God of Grace and Power, we thank you for this testimony of just how far reaching your grace can be, beyond nations, beyond armies, beyond prejudice and hate. We pray by your Spirit for this Word of grace to permeate us, transform us, and send us out. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

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The kingdom of Aram wasn't on the same scale as some of those big empires that would sweep through Israel, like Assyria or Babylon or Persia, but they were a regional rival. And more to the point, Naaman was its army's commander and was directly responsible for attacks and victories over Israel. This was an enemy.

It was almost poetic, then, perhaps from an Israelite perspective, that this "great man," this "mighty warrior," suffered from leprosy, from some kind of skin disease.

It's pointedly timely, in a horrific way, that the way Naaman's story gets going is through the testimony of a young girl whose abduction he was responsible for. An Aramean raid had taken

a young Israelite girl captive, and that girl came to serve in Naaman's household. That girl learned of Naaman's condition, and at a point when any rational response would've said, "Good. You deserve this horrible disease. Hope it's painful," this girl remembers a prophet from her home, and tells Naaman's wife that he should seek out Elisha. Naaman, presumably having sought out some kind of remedy through his own country's healers, is desperate and through the Aramean king, reaches out to this prophet.

Think about what this would mean in today's terms, in very recent, horrific terms. Imagine a leader, a commander within Hamas who was responsible for coordinating the raids and attacks in Israel, including kidnappings and the holding of hostages, being stricken with cancer, and then seeking out treatment from an Israelite doctor. That's what we're talking about here. Naaman is an enemy. What would be a reasonable, even justifiable response here? Well to say, uh, no. There weren't the Geneva Conventions then, and even if there were, this isn't a battlefield wound, or a combat medic treating all soldiers, friendly and enemy alike. It's a chronic condition. Plus, we might be tempted to think, if somehow this man is healed, just how many more Israelites will die because this man lives longer commanding an enemy army?

So many ethical minefields here. And I know we've got a lot of physicians and nurses among us, so this may not be an entirely theoretical exercise. Some of you may have faced some horrifying dilemma like this. What's the scenario they give you in school? There's a horrible wreck caused by a DUI—and tragically this is not far off from something our neighborhood suffered not long ago—but two people are brought into the ER with life-threatening injuries. The first is the impaired driver who caused the wreck; the second is a child in the other car. You're the doctor. Do you treat them differently? We know what the right answer is, but how would we feel in that position? Even though we know what answer is, there's also some lingering sense that maybe we let someone who did wrong get their just desserts simply by not intervening.

That's something like what it meant for Naaman to be seeking healing in Israel. It's not the same as an emergency room; he's not bleeding to death, but should he, an enemy, be given that healing? We know the right answer, but how many of us would really want to give it?

In fact, the more I think about it, the more I resonate with the response from the Israelite king. He says, "Am I God, to give death or life...? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." Feels like he's the only one responding with some kind of a predictable reaction: is this some trick, is he trying to pick a fight? But then word gets to Elisha about the king's response, and he sends word to the king, "Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." This healing is for a purpose: that this enemy commander might know that God is at work in Israel, and that he might know just how God is at work.

Naaman goes to Elisha's house, but in a somewhat amusing scene, he shows up with all these horses and chariots, these signs of his power and military might. "I might be coming hat in hand as far this leprosy thing, but I've still got all these horses at my beckon call." (The things we do to make it look like we're somehow still in control especially when we feel helpless.) And the funny thing? Elisha doesn't even go out to him. He can read through that display. He sends a messenger instead, saying, "Go wash in the Jordan seven times."

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But he ends up going to the river, washes seven times, and he was clean. After that, he tries to offer a present, more like trying to offer payment if you ask me, but Elisha refuses. Naaman then declares that even as he went back to his home, immersed in his home culture and his home religion, he would no longer give sacrifice to any god except the Lord.

Think of the ways we respond to grace, to mercy. Does our pride get in the way? Do we cling to control? Would we be more comfortable if it were something we could work for or strive for, something that we felt we achieved on our own rather than by another's kindness? Do we wish it were something we could pay for, even, because still we might consider it to be some kind of a fair transaction, rather than a gift freely given, unearned, unmerited? When we are shown mercy, are we resistant to it? Instead, what would lead us to embrace a way not of earning the grace of God, but rather extending the grace of God?

That's what Elisha's interested in doing. He's not interested in accommodating what would make Naaman more comfortable, or distorting grace to fit his preferences for it. He's more interested in showing this man that there was a prophet in Israel, that God was at work in Israel. He's more interested in showing the way God was at work in Israel, and that was a way of healing, of grace, of an unearned gift freely given, to an enemy even, without expectation of anything in repayment of it.

That's how Elisha saw God at work, and that's what he wanted to show Naaman: that there was a God in Israel who was mighty, yes, mighty to heal, mighty to save, but the power came in mercy.

Throughout this series we've been using as our Affirmation of Faith a portion of the Confession of 1967, one of the confessions of our church, and you might have noted some of the phrasing in it. "To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as God's reconciling community." We are sent to extend the same grace, the same healing, that God has shown us.

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On one hand, it's not like the conflict between Aram and Israel magically ceased. I mean, come on, if you just read the very next chapter, there's more violence between the two kingdoms again. But who knows what fruit of grace might grow in a harsh world if only the seeds are planted?

Nearly 80 years ago, an Iowa farm boy named Elmer Richardson was marching across France into Belgium and Germany. It was late 1944, and if we have any World War II scholars among us, you know from the location and the timeline what's about to happen.

While out on patrol one day, Richardson was ambushed by German soldiers. This was part of a larger counteroffensive that came to be known as the Battle of the Bulge. In the skirmish, Richardson was shot in the gut, captured, and taken to a nearby church converted into a field hospital.

It was there that he just assumed that he would succumb to his injuries. Sure there were international conventions about treatment of wounded enemy soldiers, but how much could he rely on those?

He was in bad shape too from the gunshot. He should have died.

But he ended up on the operating table of a German doctor named Ludwig Gruber. Gruber's commanding officers told him that this was an enemy combatant, which was true, and therefore not warranting the sort of extensive attention required to repair the damage caused by the gunshot. How many other soldiers, or more to the point, how many other *German* soldiers could be treated in the same amount of time?

But Gruber ignored them. He spent hours in surgery on Richardson and saved his life.

They struck up a friendship during Richardson's recovery, even exchanging addresses to correspond after the war.

When Richardson was slated to be transferred to a POW camp, it was Gruber who fought to keep him there at the hospital for additional time to heal.

It was in that extra time that an American Army captain came under truce to the hospital and met with Richardson, sharing the plan to bomb the area because military vehicles were using the hospital as a field headquarters. Richardson intervened, negotiating with the captain and the Germans that if the military vehicles were directed elsewhere, the area would not be bombed.

Gruber healed and saved Richardson's life. And Richardson in turn, more than likely, saved his.

Many years later, long after the war had ended and Gruber and Richardson both had returned to their countries, their homes, even long after both men themselves had died after enjoying long lives after the war, Richardson's son Steve retraced his father's steps in the war, and tried to connect with the descendants of the enemy doctor who had saved his father's life.

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It's not like the war magically ceased the day Gruber and Richardson parted ways. Thousands more died every day until the war ended. But you start doing the math at some point. In the face of all the death and violence and hostility, how many lives were born into existence that otherwise would not have, all because of the grace, the uncommon kindness shown by this German doctor toward an enemy? And many years later, how many wounds and illnesses were healed, how many lives were saved by the medical work of his sons, who were alive because this enemy soldier had intervened on an enemy's behalf? How much more light came into the world through the uncommon kindness shared between enemies?

The world is harsh. The world is often cruel. We have no shortage of histories and headlines that remind us of this every day. And at every turn there's the temptation to look out for yourself, to look out for your own, leading us to say "We're only going to extend love and grace to you if you look like ____, or if you live like ____, or if you're on our team and not on their team. Otherwise, if we're going to do anything for you, we're going to expect some things in return. You're going to have to become like us." How tempting would it have been, after all, for Elisha to say to Naaman, "I'll heal you, but first you have to renounce your country and swear faith in the God of Israel"? That's what we're tempted to say. That's what the world drives us to say.

But that's not the kind of grace that's been shown to us. And it's not the grace we've been sent out to share. And in a harsh, cruel world, what grace, what further mercies might come to light by more acts of uncommon kindness? This is how the Lord has chosen to work. This is the mission of mercy entrusted to those who follow his Son. What uncommon grace could you show today?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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2 Kings 5:1-19

October 22, 2023

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Last week, we saw how Elisha's relationship with a woman from the town of Shunam served as the foundation for healing and generosity in two directions, not just one, and about how mission is inherently relational, not transactional.

This week, we find Elisha operating in the world of kings and generals, and we see just how powerful an impact can be had through a sign of uncommon grace. Let's go to God's Word together.

2 Kings 5:1-19. *Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from a skin disease. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his skin disease." So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, "Go, then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel."*

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his skin disease." When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his skin disease? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for

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The kingdom of Aram wasn't on the same scale as some of those big empires that would sweep through Israel, like Assyria or Babylon or Persia, but they were a regional rival. And more to the point, Naaman was its army's commander and was directly responsible for attacks and victories over Israel. This was an enemy.

It was almost poetic, then, perhaps from an Israelite perspective, that this "great man," this "mighty warrior," suffered from leprosy, from some kind of skin disease.

It's pointedly timely, in a horrific way, that the way Naaman's story gets going is through the testimony of a young girl whose abduction he was responsible for. An Aramean raid had taken

a young Israelite girl captive, and that girl came to serve in Naaman's household. That girl learned of Naaman's condition, and at a point when any rational response would've said, "Good. You deserve this horrible disease. Hope it's painful," this girl remembers a prophet from her home, and tells Naaman's wife that he should seek out Elisha. Naaman, presumably having sought out some kind of remedy through his own country's healers, is desperate and through the Aramean king, reaches out to this prophet.

Think about what this would mean in today's terms, in very recent, horrific terms. Imagine a leader, a commander within Hamas who was responsible for coordinating the raids and attacks in Israel, including kidnappings and the holding of hostages, being stricken with cancer, and then seeking out treatment from an Israelite doctor. That's what we're talking about here. Naaman is an enemy. What would be a reasonable, even justifiable response here? Well to say, uh, no. There weren't the Geneva Conventions then, and even if there were, this isn't a battlefield wound, or a combat medic treating all soldiers, friendly and enemy alike. It's a chronic condition. Plus, we might be tempted to think, if somehow this man is healed, just how many more Israelites will die because this man lives longer commanding an enemy army?

So many ethical minefields here. And I know we've got a lot of physicians and nurses among us, so this may not be an entirely theoretical exercise. Some of you may have faced some horrifying dilemma like this. What's the scenario they give you in school? There's a horrible wreck caused by a DUI—and tragically this is not far off from something our neighborhood suffered not long ago—but two people are brought into the ER with life-threatening injuries. The first is the impaired driver who caused the wreck; the second is a child in the other car. You're the doctor. Do you treat them differently? We know what the right answer is, but how would we feel in that position? Even though we know what answer is, there's also some lingering sense that maybe we let someone who did wrong get their just desserts simply by not intervening.

That's something like what it meant for Naaman to be seeking healing in Israel. It's not the same as an emergency room; he's not bleeding to death, but should he, an enemy, be given that healing? We know the right answer, but how many of us would really want to give it?

In fact, the more I think about it, the more I resonate with the response from the Israelite king. He says, "Am I God, to give death or life...? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." Feels like he's the only one responding with some kind of a predictable reaction: is this some trick, is he trying to pick a fight? But then word gets to Elisha about the king's response, and he sends word to the king, "Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." This healing is for a purpose: that this enemy commander might know that God is at work in Israel, and that he might know just how God is at work.

Naaman goes to Elisha's house, but in a somewhat amusing scene, he shows up with all these horses and chariots, these signs of his power and military might. "I might be coming hat in hand as far this leprosy thing, but I've still got all these horses at my beckon call." (The things we do to make it look like we're somehow still in control especially when we feel helpless.) And the funny thing? Elisha doesn't even go out to him. He can read through that display. He sends a messenger instead, saying, "Go wash in the Jordan seven times."

Naaman's taken aback, angered by this. Angered that this prophet would not deign to even pay the courtesy to greet him in person—and he might have a point there. Angered that there's some implication that the River Jordan is somehow more better than the rivers in Damascus. Even angered that the instructions were not more challenging, something his servants point out.

But he ends up going to the river, washes seven times, and he was clean. After that, he tries to offer a present, more like trying to offer payment if you ask me, but Elisha refuses. Naaman then declares that even as he went back to his home, immersed in his home culture and his home religion, he would no longer give sacrifice to any god except the Lord.

Think of the ways we respond to grace, to mercy. Does our pride get in the way? Do we cling to control? Would we be more comfortable if it were something we could work for or strive for, something that we felt we achieved on our own rather than by another's kindness? Do we wish it were something we could pay for, even, because still we might consider it to be some kind of a fair transaction, rather than a gift freely given, unearned, unmerited? When we are shown mercy, are we resistant to it? Instead, what would lead us to embrace a way not of earning the grace of God, but rather extending the grace of God?

That's what Elisha's interested in doing. He's not interested in accommodating what would make Naaman more comfortable, or distorting grace to fit his preferences for it. He's more interested in showing this man that there was a prophet in Israel, that God was at work in Israel. He's more interested in showing the way God was at work in Israel, and that was a way of healing, of grace, of an unearned gift freely given, to an enemy even, without expectation of anything in repayment of it.

That's how Elisha saw God at work, and that's what he wanted to show Naaman: that there was a God in Israel who was mighty, yes, mighty to heal, mighty to save, but the power came in mercy.

Throughout this series we've been using as our Affirmation of Faith a portion of the Confession of 1967, one of the confessions of our church, and you might have noted some of the phrasing in it. "To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as God's reconciling community." We are sent to extend the same grace, the same healing, that God has shown us.

That's what Elisha is doing. And I wonder what mercies emerged as a result of the grace shown to Naaman, to this enemy.

On one hand, it's not like the conflict between Aram and Israel magically ceased. I mean, come on, if you just read the very next chapter, there's more violence between the two kingdoms again. But who knows what fruit of grace might grow in a harsh world if only the seeds are planted?

Nearly 80 years ago, an Iowa farm boy named Elmer Richardson was marching across France into Belgium and Germany. It was late 1944, and if we have any World War II scholars among us, you know from the location and the timeline what's about to happen.

While out on patrol one day, Richardson was ambushed by German soldiers. This was part of a larger counteroffensive that came to be known as the Battle of the Bulge. In the skirmish, Richardson was shot in the gut, captured, and taken to a nearby church converted into a field hospital.

It was there that he just assumed that he would succumb to his injuries. Sure there were international conventions about treatment of wounded enemy soldiers, but how much could he rely on those?

He was in bad shape too from the gunshot. He should have died.

But he ended up on the operating table of a German doctor named Ludwig Gruber. Gruber's commanding officers told him that this was an enemy combatant, which was true, and therefore not warranting the sort of extensive attention required to repair the damage caused by the gunshot. How many other soldiers, or more to the point, how many other *German* soldiers could be treated in the same amount of time?

But Gruber ignored them. He spent hours in surgery on Richardson and saved his life.

They struck up a friendship during Richardson's recovery, even exchanging addresses to correspond after the war.

When Richardson was slated to be transferred to a POW camp, it was Gruber who fought to keep him there at the hospital for additional time to heal.

It was in that extra time that an American Army captain came under truce to the hospital and met with Richardson, sharing the plan to bomb the area because military vehicles were using the hospital as a field headquarters. Richardson intervened, negotiating with the captain and the Germans that if the military vehicles were directed elsewhere, the area would not be bombed.

Gruber healed and saved Richardson's life. And Richardson in turn, more than likely, saved his.

Many years later, long after the war had ended and Gruber and Richardson both had returned to their countries, their homes, even long after both men themselves had died after enjoying long lives after the war, Richardson's son Steve retraced his father's steps in the war, and tried to connect with the descendants of the enemy doctor who had saved his father's life.

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It's not like the war magically ceased the day Gruber and Richardson parted ways. Thousands more died every day until the war ended. But you start doing the math at some point. In the face of all the death and violence and hostility, how many lives were born into existence that otherwise would not have, all because of the grace, the uncommon kindness shown by this German doctor toward an enemy? And many years later, how many wounds and illnesses were healed, how many lives were saved by the medical work of his sons, who were alive because this enemy soldier had intervened on an enemy's behalf? How much more light came into the world through the uncommon kindness shared between enemies?

The world is harsh. The world is often cruel. We have no shortage of histories and headlines that remind us of this every day. And at every turn there's the temptation to look out for yourself, to look out for your own, leading us to say "We're only going to extend love and grace to you if you look like ____, or if you live like ____, or if you're on our team and not on their team. Otherwise, if we're going to do anything for you, we're going to expect some things in return. You're going to have to become like us." How tempting would it have been, after all, for Elisha to say to Naaman, "I'll heal you, but first you have to renounce your country and swear faith in the God of Israel"? That's what we're tempted to say. That's what the world drives us to say.

But that's not the kind of grace that's been shown to us. And it's not the grace we've been sent out to share. And in a harsh, cruel world, what grace, what further mercies might come to light by more acts of uncommon kindness? This is how the Lord has chosen to work. This is the mission of mercy entrusted to those who follow his Son. What uncommon grace could you show today?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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2 Kings 5:1-19

October 22, 2023

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This week, we find Elisha operating in the world of kings and generals, and we see just how powerful an impact can be had through a sign of uncommon grace. Let's go to God's Word together.

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He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his skin disease." When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his skin disease? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for

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Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant." But he said, "As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!" He urged him to accept, but he refused. Then Naaman said, "If not, please let two mule loads of earth be given to your servant, for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the Lord. But may the Lord pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the Lord pardon your servant on this one count." He said to him, "Go in peace."

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SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Dr. Jay Howell

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The kingdom of Aram wasn't on the same scale as some of those big empires that would sweep through Israel, like Assyria or Babylon or Persia, but they were a regional rival. And more to the point, Naaman was its army's commander and was directly responsible for attacks and victories over Israel. This was an enemy.

It was almost poetic, then, perhaps from an Israelite perspective, that this "great man," this "mighty warrior," suffered from leprosy, from some kind of skin disease.

It's pointedly timely, in a horrific way, that the way Naaman's story gets going is through the testimony of a young girl whose abduction he was responsible for. An Aramean raid had taken

a young Israelite girl captive, and that girl came to serve in Naaman's household. That girl learned of Naaman's condition, and at a point when any rational response would've said, "Good. You deserve this horrible disease. Hope it's painful," this girl remembers a prophet from her home, and tells Naaman's wife that he should seek out Elisha. Naaman, presumably having sought out some kind of remedy through his own country's healers, is desperate and through the Aramean king, reaches out to this prophet.

Think about what this would mean in today's terms, in very recent, horrific terms. Imagine a leader, a commander within Hamas who was responsible for coordinating the raids and attacks in Israel, including kidnappings and the holding of hostages, being stricken with cancer, and then seeking out treatment from an Israelite doctor. That's what we're talking about here. Naaman is an enemy. What would be a reasonable, even justifiable response here? Well to say, uh, no. There weren't the Geneva Conventions then, and even if there were, this isn't a battlefield wound, or a combat medic treating all soldiers, friendly and enemy alike. It's a chronic condition. Plus, we might be tempted to think, if somehow this man is healed, just how many more Israelites will die because this man lives longer commanding an enemy army?

So many ethical minefields here. And I know we've got a lot of physicians and nurses among us, so this may not be an entirely theoretical exercise. Some of you may have faced some horrifying dilemma like this. What's the scenario they give you in school? There's a horrible wreck caused by a DUI—and tragically this is not far off from something our neighborhood suffered not long ago—but two people are brought into the ER with life-threatening injuries. The first is the impaired driver who caused the wreck; the second is a child in the other car. You're the doctor. Do you treat them differently? We know what the right answer is, but how would we feel in that position? Even though we know what answer is, there's also some lingering sense that maybe we let someone who did wrong get their just desserts simply by not intervening.

That's something like what it meant for Naaman to be seeking healing in Israel. It's not the same as an emergency room; he's not bleeding to death, but should he, an enemy, be given that healing? We know the right answer, but how many of us would really want to give it?

In fact, the more I think about it, the more I resonate with the response from the Israelite king. He says, "Am I God, to give death or life...? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." Feels like he's the only one responding with some kind of a predictable reaction: is this some trick, is he trying to pick a fight? But then word gets to Elisha about the king's response, and he sends word to the king, "Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." This healing is for a purpose: that this enemy commander might know that God is at work in Israel, and that he might know just how God is at work.

Naaman goes to Elisha's house, but in a somewhat amusing scene, he shows up with all these horses and chariots, these signs of his power and military might. "I might be coming hat in hand as far this leprosy thing, but I've still got all these horses at my beckon call." (The things we do to make it look like we're somehow still in control especially when we feel helpless.) And the funny thing? Elisha doesn't even go out to him. He can read through that display. He sends a messenger instead, saying, "Go wash in the Jordan seven times."

Naaman's taken aback, angered by this. Angered that this prophet would not deign to even pay the courtesy to greet him in person—and he might have a point there. Angered that there's some implication that the River Jordan is somehow more better than the rivers in Damascus. Even angered that the instructions were not more challenging, something his servants point out.

But he ends up going to the river, washes seven times, and he was clean. After that, he tries to offer a present, more like trying to offer payment if you ask me, but Elisha refuses. Naaman then declares that even as he went back to his home, immersed in his home culture and his home religion, he would no longer give sacrifice to any god except the Lord.

Think of the ways we respond to grace, to mercy. Does our pride get in the way? Do we cling to control? Would we be more comfortable if it were something we could work for or strive for, something that we felt we achieved on our own rather than by another's kindness? Do we wish it were something we could pay for, even, because still we might consider it to be some kind of a fair transaction, rather than a gift freely given, unearned, unmerited? When we are shown mercy, are we resistant to it? Instead, what would lead us to embrace a way not of earning the grace of God, but rather extending the grace of God?

That's what Elisha's interested in doing. He's not interested in accommodating what would make Naaman more comfortable, or distorting grace to fit his preferences for it. He's more interested in showing this man that there was a prophet in Israel, that God was at work in Israel. He's more interested in showing the way God was at work in Israel, and that was a way of healing, of grace, of an unearned gift freely given, to an enemy even, without expectation of anything in repayment of it.

That's how Elisha saw God at work, and that's what he wanted to show Naaman: that there was a God in Israel who was mighty, yes, mighty to heal, mighty to save, but the power came in mercy.

Throughout this series we've been using as our Affirmation of Faith a portion of the Confession of 1967, one of the confessions of our church, and you might have noted some of the phrasing in it. "To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as God's reconciling community." We are sent to extend the same grace, the same healing, that God has shown us.

That's what Elisha is doing. And I wonder what mercies emerged as a result of the grace shown to Naaman, to this enemy.

On one hand, it's not like the conflict between Aram and Israel magically ceased. I mean, come on, if you just read the very next chapter, there's more violence between the two kingdoms again. But who knows what fruit of grace might grow in a harsh world if only the seeds are planted?

Nearly 80 years ago, an Iowa farm boy named Elmer Richardson was marching across France into Belgium and Germany. It was late 1944, and if we have any World War II scholars among us, you know from the location and the timeline what's about to happen.

While out on patrol one day, Richardson was ambushed by German soldiers. This was part of a larger counteroffensive that came to be known as the Battle of the Bulge. In the skirmish, Richardson was shot in the gut, captured, and taken to a nearby church converted into a field hospital.

It was there that he just assumed that he would succumb to his injuries. Sure there were international conventions about treatment of wounded enemy soldiers, but how much could he rely on those?

He was in bad shape too from the gunshot. He should have died.

But he ended up on the operating table of a German doctor named Ludwig Gruber. Gruber's commanding officers told him that this was an enemy combatant, which was true, and therefore not warranting the sort of extensive attention required to repair the damage caused by the gunshot. How many other soldiers, or more to the point, how many other *German* soldiers could be treated in the same amount of time?

But Gruber ignored them. He spent hours in surgery on Richardson and saved his life.

They struck up a friendship during Richardson's recovery, even exchanging addresses to correspond after the war.

When Richardson was slated to be transferred to a POW camp, it was Gruber who fought to keep him there at the hospital for additional time to heal.

It was in that extra time that an American Army captain came under truce to the hospital and met with Richardson, sharing the plan to bomb the area because military vehicles were using the hospital as a field headquarters. Richardson intervened, negotiating with the captain and the Germans that if the military vehicles were directed elsewhere, the area would not be bombed.

Gruber healed and saved Richardson's life. And Richardson in turn, more than likely, saved his.

Many years later, long after the war had ended and Gruber and Richardson both had returned to their countries, their homes, even long after both men themselves had died after enjoying long lives after the war, Richardson's son Steve retraced his father's steps in the war, and tried to connect with the descendants of the enemy doctor who had saved his father's life.

He discovered that Gruber himself had had three sons, two of whom themselves became doctors in fact. And while retracing his father's steps, Steve Richardson met with Gruber's sons.

They spoke for nine hours.

Gruber's sons never knew of this mercy their father had shown to an enemy many years before. And Steve Richardson later said he felt like he gained three brothers.

It's not like the war magically ceased the day Gruber and Richardson parted ways. Thousands more died every day until the war ended. But you start doing the math at some point. In the face of all the death and violence and hostility, how many lives were born into existence that otherwise would not have, all because of the grace, the uncommon kindness shown by this German doctor toward an enemy? And many years later, how many wounds and illnesses were healed, how many lives were saved by the medical work of his sons, who were alive because this enemy soldier had intervened on an enemy's behalf? How much more light came into the world through the uncommon kindness shared between enemies?

The world is harsh. The world is often cruel. We have no shortage of histories and headlines that remind us of this every day. And at every turn there's the temptation to look out for yourself, to look out for your own, leading us to say "We're only going to extend love and grace to you if you look like ____, or if you live like ____, or if you're on our team and not on their team. Otherwise, if we're going to do anything for you, we're going to expect some things in return. You're going to have to become like us." How tempting would it have been, after all, for Elisha to say to Naaman, "I'll heal you, but first you have to renounce your country and swear faith in the God of Israel"? That's what we're tempted to say. That's what the world drives us to say.

But that's not the kind of grace that's been shown to us. And it's not the grace we've been sent out to share. And in a harsh, cruel world, what grace, what further mercies might come to light by more acts of uncommon kindness? This is how the Lord has chosen to work. This is the mission of mercy entrusted to those who follow his Son. What uncommon grace could you show today?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.