

**Prayer:** Let the Words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable O Lord who is our strength and our redeemer (Psalm 19:14). AMEN!

**Introduction:** Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 1:7b; Philippians 1:2). On this day, we have come into this house of the Lord to worship the Lord, and in so doing we are afforded an opportunity to hear God's holy Word, to give thanks for the variety of gifts bestowed upon us individually and collectively, and to pray for those things deemed necessary for our [common] life and salvation (BCP p. 41).

As we reflect on God's holy Word contained in today's readings we find they help us appreciate that our failure to listen to God and/or God's appointed messengers can be an impediment to our own healing and to that of others. Upon close examination of the readings, we can learn from the drama ensuing from two people's failure to listen; (1) Naaman in the Old Testament and (2) the leper, in the gospel according to Mark.

**Lesson:** *In the Old Testament reading we read that Naaman, a very successful military commander, and a person whom we'd consider a VIP in today's culture, delayed his own healing as a result of his inability to control his anger.* As the drama unfolds, we learn that based on the information received from his captive servant, Naaman ascertains there is a prophet who can cure him of his leprosy in Samaria-the ancient capital of the Kingdom of Israel. However, during the course of events, Naaman apparently thinks the King of Israel is the prophet. He, therefore, secures the consent of his King and who then sends a letter to the King of Israel [an enemy] requesting that he [King of Israel] cure Naaman of his leprosy. As the drama unfolds, the King of Israel gets upset after reading the King of Syria's request on behalf of Naaman and wonders if he [the King of Syria] is trying to incite a quarrel. Somehow, the prophet Elisha hears of the misunderstanding and intervenes to help Naaman and in the process avert a quarrel and perhaps hostilities. With Elisha now involved in the drama, he sends word via his servant that Naaman will be healed if he bathes in the Jordan River seven times (Feb '09 Fwd Day by Day, p. 20). Naaman becomes enraged that Elisha would not see him. After all, he is accustomed to being treated with deference. The end result, he goes away in a "huff" and is not

healed. Like us, at times, Naaman's feelings got in the way of his better judgment. If he could listen to a captive servant why wouldn't he listen to a servant of God's prophet?

In time, Naaman was able to listen to the reasoning of his own trusted servants. One could speculate that perhaps Naaman figured he had nothing to lose or perhaps God used Naaman's servants to speak to him. Thanks be to God, Naaman had a change of attitude and this time he listened, that is, he complied with the instructions conveyed by Elisha's servant – Gehazi. You can't help but wonder and think – if only Naaman had listened in the beginning.

**Lesson:** In contrast to Naaman [not an outcast], in today's gospel reading Jesus healed a leper who was an outcast in Jewish culture. Afterwards, Jesus instructed him not to say anything about who healed him. However, instead of listening to Jesus, the leper [perhaps in his excitement] did the exact opposite of what Jesus had instructed him to do exhibiting a lack of holy self-control. Consequently, this untimely disclosure resulted in Jesus' healing ministry being impeded in certain places. According to Mark's gospel [and I quote], "*Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in the country.*" In fairness to the leper, we can assume the leper had good intentions, but his actions were contrary to the instructions he had received from Jesus. He lacked self-control.

**Lesson:** The Apostle Paul reminds us in today's epistle that self-control is not only important for an athlete but by inference to the people of God. When God instructs us to do something we should trust the message and/or the messenger and obey. After all, we are not God and God knows best. Now it is understandable that we may doubt from time to time if we are getting the correct Word from the correct source. But bear in mind that God uses people as instruments of his mercy, love, and grace. It is therefore, incumbent upon us to have a healthy relationship with God so that we can discern and do the will of God rather than our own will or that of the evil one.

**Application:** In the course of our life's journey, it is conceivable that we will make mistakes like Naaman and the leper. When or if it happens, we are encouraged to confess our faults and seek God's forgiveness, love, mercy, and grace. After all, God made us and knows us better than we know ourselves and there is no certainty – as we journey in this life; we are going to make mistakes. And yet, as people of faith, it is important to understand that God does not give up on God's people, no matter what the sin or offense. Equipped with the gift of God's love and grace while standing on the promises of God, we can journey in this life with the blessed hope that God will not give up on us. Moreover, we can believe that God is at work [24X7] trying to perfect God's will in us so that as people created in God's image we will also become instruments of God's love, mercy, and grace.

- Given that God is merciful, full of compassion and slow to anger (Psalm 145:8) this is good news to the Naamans and lepers of this world. Perhaps another lesson for us to ponder is that we also ought to be merciful, full of compassion and slow to anger in our relationships with one another, especially when mistakes are made. Remember, the children of Israel? It seems that God was always bailing them out of one situation or another as they journeyed through the wilderness and kept making a mess of things. It is important to remember that God did not give up on the Israelites nor does God give up on us today.
- In our city, state, nation, and world we can recall numerous accounts of things gone wrong, and in hindsight, we say, "if only he or she had listened" things would have turned out much different. This was revealed in "Traces of the Trade" a documentary about how one family endeavored to deal with the sin of slavery in their lineage.
- You can't help but marvel at the courage it took for the members of the family to revisit their ancestors' involvement in the slave trade. Armed with 21<sup>st</sup> century understanding they could lament and seek to atone for the behavior of their ancestors by visiting a

shameful part of their history. Given the wrongheaded justification for slavery at the time, we have come to admire those messengers sent to speak out against an economic/political system that was in practice opposed to the spirit of God's holy Word which informs us as follows: *love one another as Christ loved us* (John 15:12). Likewise, the teaching associated with baptism whereby we become one family in Christ was not uniformly practiced then or now. Eleven o'clock remains one of the most segregated times in the U.S. Why? It need not be and the truth be told, WE THE PEOPLE OF GOD, have been told how to change it in God's holy Word with three words – love one another as Christ loved us.

**Conclusion:** Equipped with the knowledge that no human is perfect, and that we have fallen short of doing the will of God what is to be done? Clearly faultfinding is not the answer. Notice how God dealt with Naaman, God sent messengers and servants to speak to him until he listened and complied exhibiting God's self-control. Likewise, when the leper disobeyed Jesus' instructions exhibiting a lack of self-control, the silence of Jesus indicates that he did not lose his self-control. Why? God is love and a virtue of love is that of patience.

The good news is that God does not lose self-control for our sake and that of the Naaman's and lepers of this world. Additionally, every time we look at the Cross and recall the empty tomb, it serves as a reminder that sin is a defeated foe. WE THE PEOPLE OF GOD are now challenged to overcome the various forms of sin manifested in our lives - *but we can't do it in our own strength, we need God's help*. THANKS BE TO GOD we have a helper in the person of the Holy Spirit. Given that holy help, let us strive to exercise self-control by calling on the Holy Spirit and praying that we will not impede our own healing or that of others from the effects of our common foe – the scourge of sin.