

LOOKING FOR GOD IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES
(2 Kings 5:1-14; Mark 1:40-45)

A few weeks ago we heard the story of Jonah and you may remember I described it as a farce. Naaman and Elijah aren't a farce, but there's some humor in this story, at least the way I read it.

Naaman suffers from leprosy. There's nothing funny about that. He's gone to all the big name doctors in Syria, looking for someone – anyone – who might be able to help. No luck. We've got the makings of a tragedy and Naaman is desperate, so desperate that he even listens to a young Israelite slave girl who tells him about this prophet in Samaria. Naaman wasn't used to taking advice from slaves, especially not Israelites and especially not girls. When you get desperate enough, though, you figure you've got nothing to lose. That's Naaman.. So this high and mighty general humbles himself for the first time in his life and goes to Israel on bended knee.

That's where the humor begins, in the absurd image of a great enemy general taking advice from a lowly slave girl. What a contrast! Total reversal of roles. But here he is, the great Naaman, coming hat in hand. Well, not actually hat in hand, but with a fortune in hand hoping he can buy a cure.

And what happens when he finds the prophet he's pinning his hopes on? Elisha gives him the cold shoulder, doesn't even bother coming out to see him. He just sends his servant. Nobody disrespects Naaman like that! And then Elisha's remedy adds insult to injury: go and wash in the Jordan River seven times. Naaman is livid. "We've got better rivers in Syria. You're out of your mind if you think I'm getting down in your dirty little ditch."

Again, it's a slave to the rescue. "O great and mighty Naaman, if the prophet had told you to do something heroic, you would have jumped at it. But he asked you to do something so simple. You've come all this way, why not give it a try." Smart slave. A little reverse psychology to get to Naaman – sweet talk him, appeal to his ego, manipulate him a bit.

The humor in the story comes in the way Naaman's expectations get upset and in the unlikely helpers who show him the way. He's used to getting his way, only here nothing goes his way or the way he thinks it should. He's used to dealing with peers, only here it's slaves who get him down off his high horse so there can be a happy ending.

Sometimes I wonder what's the connection between the Old Testament reading and the gospel, but today it's pretty clear. We've got two healing stories and both involve leprosy. Of course, the man Jesus heals is nothing like Naaman. He's the exact opposite – nameless, powerless, penniless.

And the stories have this in common, too. In both of them God's healing power comes in unexpected forms. Who would have imagined that a slave girl might be the answer to Naaman's prayers? And the power of that common rabbi from Nazareth constantly astounded people. We might imagine God as high and

mighty, lifted up, distant and detached. But Jesus reminds us that God is with us in the grubby reality of daily life – reminds us and surprises us.

The dynamics haven't changed. God still works through ordinary, unlikely, unexpected people. There are people right here in this congregation who could testify that they have been touched by God in some unexpected way – touched by the care and compassion of some other person in this congregation. An incarnate God works wonders through ordinary people, people like you and like me.

That's the great wonder of the church, not that it's flawless, not that it's made up of saints, but that despite its flaws and shortcomings it's still the body of Christ and God's hands in the world.

The church has its fair share of critics who complain that it's messed up, or even worse, that it's full of self-righteous hypocrites. I've said it before but it bears repeating: the response to critics like that is simple: "There's always room for one more. You'll fit right in."

Some things just never change. People found fault with Jesus. He wasn't spiritual enough for some. He liked a good party. He hung out with the wrong crowd. And his first followers were no better. He didn't start off with a dozen spiritually minded religious virtuosos. He started off with ordinary people, people with their feet on the ground, not with their heads in the clouds.

From the very beginning people had trouble seeing God in a Jew from Nazareth. And they still have trouble seeing God or Christ in the church. Some things, in other words, never change. And they won't change and they can't change because the only way God has to get things done on earth is through people just like us.

Maybe that's as much a sign of God's sense of humor as the way God played with Naaman's head all those years ago. "You think you know where to find me or what it's going to look like when you find me? Guess again."

In a sense I suppose that's bad news – bad news because it preempts some of our excuses. We can't feel sorry for ourselves when we look at some other church and envy what they're doing because they're just ordinary folks, too, folks just like us. The biggest, grandest, most alive church is still made up of regular people, people who have been touched by the Spirit and who have let the Spirit move them in unexpected ways.

Sure, if Jesus had any sense he would have called someone else – someone besides us – to carry on his work. He would have called someone with fewer limitations and more talents. But that's not the way God works, never has been and never will be.

Think of any hero in the Bible. Can you name a single one who didn't have a flaw? I can't. Every one of them had shortcomings, some of them awfully serious. The greatest heroes in the history of the church had their shortcomings, some of them awfully serious. But those shortcomings didn't stop God from calling them. And just as important, they couldn't stop God's work from getting done.

No offense, but we have our shortcomings, too. But that didn't stop God from calling us and those shortcomings don't excuse us from doing God's work.

The job may look too big. We may be plagued by doubts and fears. We may be a bundle of limitations.

Here's the good news: God is an old hand, an absolute expert at working with people just like us. God has plenty of experience getting extraordinary things out of the most ordinary people. Paul in one of his letters pretty well sums up the point I'm trying to make when he says that "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are" (1 Cor. 1:27).

It may say hard to see the humor when we're facing a task that is just too big and that we can't imagine being able to accomplish. But when we summon up our faith and say "What the heck!" and jump in with both feet, somewhere God is smiling.