

AS SIMPLE AS THAT

See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand! It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised—only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! As for those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.

Galatians 6: 11-16

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favour with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. 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 leprosy.' 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 leprosy.' 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 leprosy? 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 leprosy! 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.

2 Kings 5:1-14



He's been living with this for longer than he cares to remember ... but he still does remember, sometimes.

When things haven't gone well on the battlefield, or when he catches just the faintest glimpse of regret on his wife's face before she hides it with a smile that is always just a little bit too big – on those days, in those moments, he can't help but remember back to that very first morning.

He had woken up like normal, had slept like a baby and dreamt of ruling the world, if he remembered correctly; he'd gone about his normal morning routine still glowing from the triumph of his dreams – it wasn't until he sat down to breakfast that he noticed the white spot that had blossomed across the palm of his hand.

He hadn't realized at first what it was, only that it was strangely beautiful: a perfect snowflake that had embedded itself on his hand. Perhaps it was a sign of blessing, he thought, a mark that he would be someone special – that his dreams would come true. Or, he remembered thinking, perhaps it was a birthmark finally pushing to the surface after years of lying dormant.

In any case, he hadn't worried about it. He'd gone about his day and no one had noticed it. By the time he fell into bed that evening, he had completely forgotten it was even there.

It was the next morning he remembered particularly vividly. It was if overnight one snowflake had turned into a blizzard – the small white spot on his palm had spread and he woke up to white blotches covering his arms and shoulders, creeping up his neck. He even found one peeling its way across his chest.

The hope of a blessed mark seemed to have transformed over the course of a single night into a mark of Cain – a burden to be borne – from dreams of glory to assurances of strange looks and increased distance.

He remembered having an inkling of what this might be, but he dismissed it out of hand – everyone knew lepers were sinners – individuals who had led illicit lives, committed spiritual crimes, people who were bad. And Naaman wasn't any of those things ...

It was his wife who had finally found him – still sitting and staring in increasing disbelief and horror at what was taking over his body and was sure to take over his life. It was his wife who took him to the priest. It was his wife who sat with him after the diagnosis – promising that things wouldn't change, assuring him there were certainly kinds of leprosy that didn't imply spiritual wretchedness. It was his wife who he heard softly crying herself to sleep that night. It was his wife who he knew he had hurt the most.

That was the thing about leprosy wasn't it? It wasn't just him who was stigmatized – it was his whole family ...

But really, he didn't like to think about it. Which was why, when his wife brought up another possibility for healing, he wasn't as enthused as she seemed to be. They'd tried healings before – a priest, a man claiming to be a magician, a natural healer – everyone had their suggestions, their homemade remedies; plenty were willing to take your money in exchange for a sure-fire solution. But none of them had changed the fact that he was still covered, head to toe, in white splotches – peeling, pusing skin that never managed to heal itself and always managed to attract attention.

Yet, he'd do anything for his wife, for the chance to repair her image, to give her hope. So he agreed to look into this new prophet the foreign slave girl had mentioned.

That was how, four days later, he ended up in front of the king, asking permission to go not only to another healer, but into enemy territory. This really was humiliation above and beyond what he normally subjected himself to – to have to remind, not only himself but the king of his condition, and then to travel to foreign lands and beg for a miracle he knew wouldn't come – throwing away talents of silver and shekels of gold that could have been put to better use. His pride would not be able to withstand many more of these undertakings. Nor would his emotional sensibilities for that matter. For, as hard as he tried, there was a piece of him that always hoped – a glimmer of possibility he couldn't squash.

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So ... you can imagine his outrage when he finally reaches this so-called prophet. A man who won't even show his face, but sends a messenger to tell Naaman to bathe in a river. All this way, all this humiliation, all this money for a man who won't even come out to meet him and tells him only to do something he's done thousands of times before – bathe in a river. Surely he could have done this at home.

And then he is rebuked. His servants, of all people, challenge him and urge him to just try. What can it hurt? they ask. You'd complete a difficult task in a second if it meant getting healed, why not at least try the easy task.

Perhaps it is as simple as that ...

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Perhaps it *is* as simple as that ...

It was for Paul. Paul, who wrote "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate ... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."¹ Paul whose faith landed him in prison; Paul who urged the Philippians to work out their salvation with fear and trembling.² For, Paul, when it came to the issue of circumcision, it was just simpler than all that.

¹ Romans 7:15-19 excerpted.

² Philippians 2:12

There were those who were arguing that all followers of Jesus, whether they were Jews or Gentiles, needed to be circumcised. And then there were those, as you might imagine, who were arguing that grown men did not need to be circumcised in order to follow Jesus.

It was the supporters of circumcision who were looking to Paul for support; Paul, who had been the most legalistic Jew imaginable; Paul who knew how challenging faith could be and how many sacrifices it could ask of you; Paul surprised them all and said neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but a new creation is everything.

For Paul, in this instance, it wasn't about the pain and legality of circumcision, nor any of the old Jewish laws; it was simpler and more consuming than that – it was about living your life a certain way. No longer was the legality of the details important, rather, it was how you treated your neighbors and whether or not you loved the stranger in your midst.

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There are, so far as I can tell, two lines of thought about this today. The first is that we are created to do amazing things. As children of God, created in God's image, the possibilities of what we can accomplish are limitless. Author Marianne Williamson writes that "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world."³

I only need to think about Martin Luther King Jr, Oscar Romero, Dorothy Day, Mahatma Ghandi, Rosa Parks or Susan B. Anthony to believe that is the case: we can do incredible, world-changing things when we put our minds and our lives to it.

The second line of thought is that we can do no great things, only small, day to day things. Mother Teresa said it best, I think, when she said, "We cannot do great things in this life, only small things with great love." And when I think about my life, I see the truth in this line of thought as well.

Part of my summer employment in the Office of Communications and Publications at the Seminary is writing down all the times the Seminary is mentioned in the news. Many of these entries are events taking place or announcements of funding changes. But a lot of them are about people who graduated from the seminary and have gone on to do amazing things. From the couple who are being honored for a lifetime of service in Korea to the recent graduate who has already published their first book – the accomplishments are astounding and impressive.

As someone still struggling to discern my call and work out what my life's work will be, these stories alternate between being inspiring and completely overwhelming. Who am I to write a

³ Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love*

book, or spend a lifetime in a foreign country? Who am I to commit my whole life to making a difference? It can be daunting to contemplate.



But perhaps the two lines of thought: that we are created to do incredible things, and that we can do no great things, but only small things with great love, are not as contradictory as they seem at first. Perhaps it is doing the small things that we accomplish the great things.

Paul wrote that it wasn't about circumcision – it was about new creation – it was about the little things you did every day that showed **what** you thought or **who** you thought was most important.

For Naaman, it wasn't about the intricate rituals of healing or the hocus pocus of magic, it was simply a matter of putting his pride and disbelief aside and bathing in a new river.

For us, perhaps it isn't about starting the next revolution, writing the epic novel, or saving the world in the next few days. Maybe it's simply a matter of loving our neighbors, even the ones we don't like, or recycling our trash and turning off the lights when we leave a room; maybe it's about speaking out on issues we care about rather than hoping someone else will; or making sure we vote, even when the election seems a foregone conclusion. Maybe for us it's about dedicating ourselves to loving God above all other choices and then letting the pieces of our lives fall where they may.

It's not always as easy as it sounds – for it requires us to put away our pride, to be open to the inconceivable, and to make the commitment every single day to make the small difference that we can.

But maybe it's as simple, and as consuming, as that.

Amen.

CHARGE:⁴

God has shown you what is good.
What does the Lord require of you,
but to do justice
and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God?

BLESSING:⁵

May the God of hope
fill you with all joy & peace in believing
so that you may abound in hope
by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴ from Book of Common Worship

⁵ Ibid.