

“The Help”

February 12, 2012

2 Kings 5:1-17

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 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.

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.

When you consider a story the first thing you do is identify the main characters. Only two people in this story have names, so they must be the most important. Naaman is the commander the army of Aram. Elisha held the title of “prophet” for the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Naaman had at his command all of the king’s army. Elisha had his king’s ear. Naaman had all that money could buy. Elisha had a power that only God could give. Naaman and his armies raided the Northern Kingdom defeating its armies on numerous occasions. Naaman and Elisha are the main characters, they have names, and clout.

There are two kings in the story but they don’t seem to have much of a presence. The king of Aram is the one that told Naaman to go the king of Israel and loaded him up with an entourage of gifts and personnel. The king of Israel cowered with Naaman’s arrival. He was terrified, thinking that somehow this was a trap, and he didn’t know what to do. Elisha rescued the king when told the king to send him on over to his house and he would take care of it.

Naaman was rich and powerful but he was also afflicted with an awful skin condition called leprosy. We don’t know for sure about what this condition looked like and how it affected a person but one thing we know for sure is that Naaman was desperate for a cure. All the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t do anything for Naaman’s skin.

A servant girl in Naaman’s house knew about Elisha the prophet in Israel and she told Naaman’s wife about him. Naaman went to the king of Aram to get his blessing to go to Israel in search of a cure. So the king wrote a letter to the king of Israel asking him to heal Naaman. And Naaman set off with a treasure trove of bounty as a gift for the king. The king of Israel panicked when he read the letter because he knew he couldn’t heal Naaman. Elisha heard about Naaman and told the king to send Naaman to him.

So Naaman went to Elisha's house and a servant ran out to give him a message from Elisha, "Go wash in the Jordan River seven times and you will be healed." Elisha didn't even wave from the door. Naaman expected Elisha to come out and wave his hands to heal him so when the instruction was to wade into the Jordan seven times it was more than his ego could take. He was furious, furious enough to just go home.

Still hopeful for a healing, his servants calmed him down. "If he would have asked you to do something hard you would have done it, right?" Naaman nodded. "So why not just try this." Naaman had to swallow his pride and agreed. After his seventh dip in the river he came out clean. He wanted to thank Elisha, but Elisha refused his gift. So he asked Elisha for a couple loads of dirt to take back home so that he, too, could worship the God of Israel.

The fact that Elisha healed a foreigner was written into the pages of history. Naaman was an enemy. He had raided and plundered the land. He had killed Israelites and taken slaves. Even so, Elisha healed him. It's hard to tell which was the greater miracle; that Naaman was cured or that Elisha cured him at all.

Yet, none of this would have happened if not for the help. The servant girl that told Naaman's wife about Elisha was a young slave taken from Israel. Without her there is no story. It is hard to fathom why she would even care about Naaman, who knows, maybe she doesn't. Maybe her life depends on her finding favor with Naaman. Maybe she hopes he will set her free. She could have let him rot, literally, but she didn't. Just imagine the risk she was taking in even mentioning Elisha – what if he didn't turn out to be so powerful after all. Her confidence must have been quite convincing.

It was another servant that delivered Elisha's instructions to Naaman. It was this servant that had to bear the wrath of Naaman's rage.

Then there was Naaman's own servants who calmed him down and reasoned with him. Without them, he would have stomped home, still a leper.

Without these unnamed servants, there would be no story, and no healing. We are left wondering if Naaman ever thought to say as much as, "thank you."

In two weeks the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences will announce the winners of this year's Academy Awards. Nominated for best picture is a movie called, "The Help." It tells the story of a young female writer, white and privileged, trying to make a name for herself in the publishing business. She is instructed to write about something that troubles her, something she cares about, something provocative. She sets out to write a collection of stories written from the perspective of the domestics that work for her white friends. She is transformed as these women, at great risk to themselves, begin to tell their stories. Growing up in Jackson, Mississippi, raised by a black maid herself, she never once thought about what it was like for these women. Her eyes were opened to the brutality of racism and segregation.

The fact that a white woman wrote the novel is an outrage to some critics. Yet others praise the movie for challenging us to consider those who serve us, with little recognition, little pay, and at great expense to their own bodies and families.

Though the story is fiction it accurately depicts the reality of its time. As I read the book I wondered if I would be as blind as the characters in the story. Would I believe that some folks deserve to be treated like property used like slaves? Would I think that is okay?

It would be nice if we could say it doesn't happen today, but you and I know that's not true. The food we eat, the clothes we wear, the electronics we enjoy are all tainted with horror stories of exploited labor. Two weeks ago PBS program called "Religion and Ethics" discussed the tomato industry in Florida. During the winter months almost all of the tomatoes in our grocery stores are from south Florida. "Florida's tomato workers are usually paid by how much they pick, traditionally getting about 45 to 50 cents for every 32-pound bucket they fill. That means to make a day's minimum

wage, each worker has to pick two-and-a-half-tons of tomatoes a day... Immokalee is a town full of young men from Mexico, Central America, and Haiti, many undocumented, who have come here to scratch out a better life for themselves by harvesting Florida's tomato crops. Some of them end up victims of the industry's worst abuses, including incidents of modern day slavery...There have also now been nine federally prosecuted slavery operations in just the last 14 years here in Florida agriculture....[the person being interviewed pointed down the street to a place where workers] were locked in the back of a cargo truck, literally shackled. We saw bruises on their wrists where they had been literally restrained by their employers. [There are, however, a few signs of improvement.] Changes in the fields, like the one owned by Pacific Tomato, include greater access to drinking water and more rest periods, regular bathroom breaks, and a zero tolerance for verbal abuse and sexual harassment by field bosses." The Coalition for Immokalee Workers is beginning to make an impact. We are starting to listen.

When you go to Scott's or Fareway and see a pile of tomatoes, do you ever stop to think about those who picked them? We are so accustomed to going to stores that we are growing disconnected from where stuff comes from. My husband visited a farm in Vermont that hosted tours of school children. At one point the farmer pulled a carrot out of the dirt. A student in the group gasped, "Why do you keep your carrots in the dirt?"

Every day we are served – by someone around the globe or someone right in front of us. Waiters, custodians, pickers, farm workers, housekeepers, laundry attendants.... Do we even notice? Do we show any appreciation? How do we live the Golden Rule in our day to day transactions with others?

The last cruise I took I asked our smiling waiter, Pablo, what his typical day was like. He stopped smiling and seemed reluctant to tell me. "I get one meal off a week" he said. A typical day is 11 hours, 7 days a week, for six months straight. Yet he served us as if it was his pleasure to do so, just like 1100 of his multi-national co-workers.

What stories would be told if all the people that served us wrote them down for us to read? Would they be stories of justice, compassion, and love? Or would they be stories of exploitation, degradation, and entitlement? We can't assume to know the answer. The only way to know is ask and listen, even if we don't want to hear it. Then maybe we can ask ourselves how we are doing on the whole Golden Rule thing.

Naaman was known to all as a great man. The young girl was a nameless slave. We can't presume to know what story Naaman's servant girl might tell – all we know is that he owed her his life. Doesn't it make you wonder? Who are the people on whom our lives depend?

There is no such thing as self-sufficiency – we need each other.