



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMON

“Getting Past Entitlement”

Scripture Lessons: *2 Kings 5:1, 9-14; Mark 12: 41-44*

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling Jr.
on October 8, 2023, at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church
in Charleston, South Carolina.*

2 Kings 5: 1, 9-14

The Healing of Naaman

5 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.

⁹ So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and halted at the entrance of Elisha’s house. ¹⁰ 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.” ¹¹ 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! ¹² Are not Abana^[a] 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. ¹³ 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’?” ¹⁴ 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.

Mark 12: 41-44

The Widow’s Offering

⁴¹ He sat down opposite the treasury and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³ Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴ For all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

Getting Past Entitlement

Our daughter Mary Caroline turned 13 on Thursday, and I was thinking back on her life and the joys of parenting, and I remembered a particular story of a time when we were in Target.

Now, Martha Ann and I had gotten into the habit of rewarding Mary Caroline for every good behavior – if, for example, she was good while we were shopping, we would give her a small piece of candy or a toy or some other kind of surcee!

On this particular trip to Target, when Mary Caroline was around 5 years old ... I felt that it was about time for her to start being good without the promise of a reward ... and so as we prepared to go into the store, I told her this: “Mary Caroline, I think you are old enough now to be a good girl in the store and not need a treat.”

We talked for a moment or two and she smiled and nodded (shaking my head).

She couldn’t have been sweeter in the store -- but on our way out I noticed that she instinctively reached for a piece of candy and put it in the cart.

And so I calmly and quietly reminded her that she had been very good girl, but that we were not going to get a piece of candy that day; whereupon she not so calmly nor quietly reminded me that she had, in fact, been good and that she deserved a piece of candy.

... Dad in one corner, wanting to stick to his guns, and in the other corner was a 5-year-old who wanted a piece of candy. I looked at Martha Anna for some support, and she looked at me with the kind of knowing glance that meets at the intersection of, “You brought this on yourself” and “Good luck with that.”

I guess at some level I did bring it on myself – I picked the wrong battle, one might say – and while that may all true, there was also something going on in that moment, and it is something that goes on to a greater or lesser degree in all of our lives ... and there’s a word for it ... it’s called entitlement.

Now, I suppose Mary Caroline’s wasn’t the truest form of entitlement, because there was a prerequisite of good behavior ...

True entitlement leaves good behavior or any other responsibility out of the equation, and what’s left is simply the expectation of a benefit. That somehow for simply being alive that certain privileges should be ours. “I deserve it,” we hear. “I am owed this” or “I am owed that.”

A potential employee says to their boss, “That corner office over there – I like that one ... and the gold

benefits package, I'll take that too ... but this whole thing about coming into the office, we need to talk about."

Or maybe it is the employer who is entitled ... presuming that others are beneath them -- less power, less status -- and so they say the crude joke or make the not-so-subtle innuendo.

Speaking of jokes, I often say that one of the surefire ways you can tell that a driver in Charleston is from "off," is if they start honking their horn a mere fraction of a second after the lights turn green. ...

Seriously though, entitlement is real ... it may be that person who receives a good wage, but for whom that wage is not perceived as nearly enough given who they are ... it may be a husband who expects his wife to do for him what his mother did for his father ... it may be a little child who is owed a piece of candy ... or maybe later in life a cell phone.

How can we faithfully deal with an issue like entitlement, an issue that so blatantly sets our priorities askew, inflates our egos, and removes any sense of accountability – that dreadful temptation toward a life that is centered around ourselves ... focused more on privilege than responsibility?

How can we protect what God would have us to enjoy ... a grateful spirit, a heart and mind that is centered on Jesus?

Well, I think we need to realize first that this is nothing new ... entitlement is not unique to this post-modern world of ours. In fact, a similar spirit of entitlement was at work years ago and in the lives of God's own people after the Exodus ...

Granted, the Bible does not talk about "entitlement" as such, but it is undoubtedly there. When God's people had been freed from bondage / freed from slavery; instead of being grateful to God for his provision ... a provision that came in the form of manna in the morning and quail at night ... they grumbled.

They said, "We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt ... the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."

... And isn't it interesting – that the manna ... they describe it as something they "look at, not meant to eat." It's almost as if they don't even recognize it as a provision ... We get the very real sense that God's people felt like they deserved much better.

In our reading this morning from the Old Testament, we are introduced to a man called Naaman, a well-to-do and well-regarded commander in Israel's army, but there is one big problem that Naaman

can't fix ... he has leprosy, a burdensome skin condition.

And so he goes to Elisha because he knows that Elisha has the power to heal him, and, Elisha, for his part, sends a messenger to Naaman ... and that messenger says this: "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean."

But Naaman gets upset ... and listen to what he says: "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."

You see, Naaman thought that because of who he was that he deserved special treatment. Elisha shouldn't have sent a messenger ... he should have dropped everything he was doing ... he should have come to Naaman right away!

I mean, Naaman was, after all, a commander in the army ... ah, but is not Naaman also a doctor, a teacher ... a gardener ... a lawyer ... is he not you and me?

I don't think Naaman was altogether different from the scribes that Jesus referenced in our New Testament lesson this morning.

Men who we are told ... "Like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets." But more than simply liking those things -- those scribes had come to expect them.

A far cry from the message of our Savior who always managed to put other people first / who did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but rather humbled himself. He is the one who said: "For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

That was one of the chief problems for Naaman and the Scribes, and, quite frankly, for anyone who struggles with a sense of entitlement ... it is a matter of thinking too much of ourselves ... and not nearly enough about others.

Getting past entitlement involves taking to heart what Jesus means when he says, "The one who wishes to be great must become a servant."

... And not just a servant in a general kind of way, mind you ... Naaman was a servant of the people / he was responsible ... but he failed to see that at the heart of the matter was the extent to which he was a servant and responsible in the ways that mattered to God.

The people Mark describes for us in our New testament lesson were very keen on keeping the outward commands of the law, but they didn't seem all interested in keeping the inward commands of the heart.

...And so it happened that as the coins of their abundance rattled and rolled in the temple treasury, we are left to wonder if anything at all resounded in their souls.

Yet standing nearby and attracting the attention of virtually no one – save the one who looks upon the motivations of our hearts – there was a widow, humble and generous, and we are told that she gave everything she had to live on.

But let us not miss the point ... her story is not so much a matter of giving money as it is a matter of putting her complete trust in God ... it was a matter of looking beyond herself and to the needs of others.

That, dear friends, is one of the very best ways to get past entitlement ... to think about other people / to consider their needs, and not our own.

On Wednesday of last week Margaret Merrit, the US Executive Director for the Lamb Institute, offered a brief program after our Wednesday supper. Lamb is a fabulous ministry in Honduras that offers invaluable support to those who are extremely poor and vulnerable, especially children.

At the end of her program, Margaret encouraged our stewardship efforts, saying that by supporting First (Scots) we were supporting the Lamb Institute. And while this is true, to the point at hand, stewardship is about gratitude. While this is true, how might that influence our attitude toward the BIG things? How might that change our hearts?

To the point at hand, stewardship is about gratitude, and gratitude undermines entitlement. Do you know what else undermines entitlement? Contentment.

Over the years I've subscribed to all kinds of email updates, and I often receive communications from missionaries or people reporting on missionaries, and the prayer concerns are not always what you might think ...

It is not necessarily the call for a generator or the need for another mission team to come that is communicated ... it is sometimes the need for basic safety for those who are serving God in a hostile place, or reliable electricity or safe running water! Things that we, here in Charleston, don't ever have to worry about! Imagine if we were always content with the little things, thankful for those everyday bouquets of grace.

In the end, we are given grace, not to hold and be prideful or expectant of it – but to approach it with awe and wonder and humility, but also responsibility.

Of course, it is ultimately God, and our relationship with God, that is fundamental to the transformation of our hearts.

It is like the woman who had lived for 94 years, nearly 70 of those years as a widow who had raised two children as a single parent and at whose funeral the family and friends constantly spoke of how she was simply content.

It's like the Apostle Paul who while in prison / under house arrest, and with one guard on his left and one guard on his right says, "I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need."

And that secret, it is revealed in what Paul says in the very next verse ... the secret, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Jesus is the truest source of our contentment and of any holy notion that we might about living an other-centered life ... To put it another way, when we are thankful to God for his blessings -- we tend not to be as focused on the things we don't have, and when we are serving others / and looking out for their welfare -- it is a lot harder to be preoccupied with ourselves.

One of the absolute fundamentals of our faith -- and this flies right in the face of entitlement -- we didn't do anything to earn God's favor! We do not deserve God's mercy; but the miracle, in God's sovereign will, is that by grace through faith ... we get it anyway!

Let us pray ... Gracious and Loving God, you have made us, and redeemed us and called us your own. By your Spirit, may we continue to see your blessings for what they are, and not for what we expect them to be. May we live our lives in service to you and one another, and may we take our responsibilities to be your children and your church so seriously that our lives and the life of the world will never be the same. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.