

"Taking a Stand"

Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
Independence, MO
Sunday, August 7, 2011

Old Testament: Genesis 32:22-31

New Testament: Acts 13:16-23

CNN reported a week ago Tuesday that researchers with the World Health Organization found that people living in poorer countries are actually happier than those of us living in wealthier countries.¹ Earlier research dating back to the late '90s shows that, in America, the richest people – the type who show up on Forbes' list of the 100 wealthiest Americans – these people are *not* any happier than the average American.

Similarly, there seems to be little relationship between disabilities and happiness. For instance, within four months of his paralyzing accident, Christopher Reeve reported “genuine joy in being alive.” Researchers have found however, five traits that do characterize happy people.² They are: First, “Positive self-image.” People who are content with life, are confident about their abilities; they embrace their gifts. Second, “Personal Control.” Upbeat people exert control over their lives. In other words, people who are happier are more self-disciplined than people who aren't. Third, “Optimism.” A positive outlook on life and openness to others is essential to good emotional health. Fourth, “Being Extroverted.” But not necessarily being the opposite of an introvert. Here, it just refers to the ability to achieve lasting relationships with others.

In other words, people who are happier have other people in their lives. But the trait that correlated most closely with happiness was No. 5: “Faith.” Karl Marx famously called religion “the opiate of the people.” But according to this research, we would be better off thinking of religion as the yeast or flour of happiness, as in an ingredient. Religion, it turns out, is the key ingredient or stimulant that gives rise to a happy life. And all of this happiness translates into better health and a longer life, so much so that medical students are now being taught to take not only medical histories, but also “faith histories.”

In our Old Testament Lesson, Nāaman came to God's prophet Elisha with a physical illness, and what was this man of God's response? Elisha took a ‘faith history’ for Nāaman. “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.” By prescribing a simple dip in the water, Elisha is testing or evaluating Nāaman's faith. But Nāaman is a wealthy, famous and powerful military commander who reports directly to the King. He's too busy to travel to Israel in hopes of an uncertain cure. He'd rather have Elisha make a house call. “I thought that for me,” says

¹ cf “More Money More Problems; Depression Up In Wealthier Nations,” Jul-27-2011, http://newsfeedresearcher.com/data/articles_m31/depression-countries-people.html#hdng1

² Bob Kaylor, “Keep the Faith & Keep Fit,” Homiletics, July 05, 1998.

Nāaman, “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!”

Nāaman is not as interested in being made well as he is in maintaining his lifestyle and social standing. Going to Israel would take time away from his other activities. People might not understand why he would bother going to “some special” place for Elisha’s God when Nāaman’s country, Aram, has its own god “Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?” he asks. “Could I not wash in them and be clean?” And with that, Nāaman storms off in a rage.

A few moments from now, we will receive the Lord’s Supper; partake in the one Table that’s open to all who profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Our access to the Table is the same access that Nāaman has to God’s cure. Nāaman can partake in God’s healing *only* if he comes to believe and then acts on that belief. And likewise, our profession of faith – that Jesus Christ is Savior – that’s the belief part. That Jesus is Lord – that’s the action part; seeking and acting on God’s instruction in our lives.

How do we come to believe in God? What actions are we willing to take to maintain our relationship with God? How do we know what to do so that we have that closeness with God in our lives and in our families?

Nāaman came to believe by following Elisha’s instructions, even though he didn’t see what difference it could make. Where do we get our instructions when it comes to drawing close to God and following Jesus? One place is the church. The church is where we go to get instruction in the faith, instruction for developing and maintaining meaningful, life-changing habits and practices. And sometimes we don’t understand why we do what we do. Sometimes we just get bored, don’t we, with doing the same thing over and over again. I mean, the things we do here in worship, we’ve done – and people have done – for years and years, more than 2,000 years, really. After awhile, such patterns can get old and routine, and we tend to stop paying attention or expecting them to mean anything for us.

Airline attendants know about this. Have you been on any of those flights where they’re trying to make their “in-flight” instructions less boring and routine? Things like: “Smoking in the lavatories is prohibited. Any person caught smoking in the lavatories will be asked to leave the plane immediately.” “Your seat cushions can be used for flotation, and in the event of an emergency water landing, please take them with our compliments.” (I think they’ve recently added a charge on that one.) “Thank you for flying Delta Business Express. We hope you enjoyed giving us the business as much as we enjoyed taking you for a ride.” And finally, “As you exit the plane, please make sure to gather all of your belongings. Anything left behind will be distributed evenly among the flight attendants. Please do not leave children or spouses.” A pretty strange set of instructions, isn’t it? But no stranger than those given to Nāaman on his journey from ordinary-yet-self-sufficient leader to extraordinary-yet-humble servant of God. Nāaman’s instruction is, ‘If you want to be cured of your leprosy, go wash in the Jordan seven times.’ Not the Abana River or Pharpar River. Not six times; not eight times. But seven times in the Jordan.

And this left Nāaman wondering why he had to do what the God of Israel said through this prophet named Elisha. We often wonder the same about our instruction in the faith, don't we?

Our instruction is to maintain regular spiritual practices – worship, prayer, mission outreach, tithing, study, compassion and celebration – even if *we* are left wondering why we need to do these things over and over again. Nāaman does three things on his journey to belief in the Lord, a belief he can accept and begin acting on, a belief that will lead him to spiritual and physical wholeness. First, he **accepts guidance** from someone else. “His servants ... 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?”’ Are we willing to follow the guidance of others in our lives, even if it comes from an unexpected place such as Nāaman’s servants?

The second thing Nāaman does is he acts on the guidance he’s given. He tests it for himself. He is willing to **give it a try**. In spite of his doubts or how it might make him look in the eyes of his friends, family and colleagues, Nāaman goes to the river Jordan in Israel and checks it out for himself. He approaches the prophet’s instruction with an open mind. Are we willing to wade into new ways of connecting to our faith? Do we take the time to bathe in God’s word – God’s instruction to us – by reading the Bible, checking out books on faith and spirituality, turning to God in prayer when life is coming at us full blast and just won’t let up?

Third, having seen how God *can* work in his life, Nāaman decides to **take a stand**. From that moment onward when it comes to his faith practices and beliefs, Nāaman cannot be moved or dislodged. How often are the practices we feel called to, bumped out of our lives by “important stuff” that leaves us feeling depleted and disconnected from life? Don’t we sometimes find ourselves giving all that we have in service to things that just don’t matter? But not Nāaman; not any longer. Nāaman decides to take a stand; to get grounded in the faith. He asks Elisha, “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.

Catherine the Great once built a Russian Orthodox church in Nice, in the south of France, so she could worship in the manner to which she was accustomed while visiting there. It occurred to her, as she was planning the project that the church had to be on Russian soil in order for it to be a true place of worship. So the Empress arranged to have a barge load of Russian soil transported to Nice, so the church could be built upon it.

Well, this is the same thing Nāaman is doing, taking two mule-loads of Nice, rich Israel earth back to Aram so he can worship God on holy ground. Talk about taking a stand for your faith, literally!

Of course, we don’t need to stand on a mule-load of special dirt to worship God or to be cleansed by the Lord of what troubles us. We just need our faith, AND the spiritual and sacrificial practices that back it up.

Going to the Jordan was a sacrifice for Nāaman – he gave up a significant bit of his time and comfort, took the risk of looking foolish, and, having gotten something unexpected out of the experience, he wanted to give something back, saying to Elisha, “Please accept a present from your servant.” “Your servant” – Nāaman, this commander of armies, also gave in to being humble and dutiful before God, like a servant. And that’s what we’re asked to do, as well, to follow the Lord dutifully.

In a few moments, we will perform the ritual known as the Lord’s Supper. Some people think this is a silly and even foolish thing to do. Many wouldn’t “waste” their time coming to church. And they certainly wouldn’t give money to God through the church. And even those of us who do, we don’t always struggle to give sacrificially, do we? But still, we do spend some time in church, we maintain spiritual practices and rituals like the Lord’s Supper, affirmations of faith, reciting Christian creeds, and occasionally we do give sacrificially of our time, talents, and treasures. We do these things because God asks them of us. Through God’s word made known to us in the pages of the Bible, we take a stand as Christians. And through the blessings of our lives, we witness to the life-giving presence of the Lord.

Our spiritual practices – worship, service, giving, prayer, and fellowship – these are the ground on which we stand – spiritually, physically, mentally, and emotionally. When you receive the Lord’s Supper today, let it be for you the ground on which you stand, having received the Lord’s guidance, and having tried it out in your life and then as you take the Lord’s Supper, know that you are taking a stand as a humble and dutiful servant of God, a servant who has been made clean and whole by washing in the waters of your faith, seven times, or seventy-seven times – if that’s what God asks of us.

Pastoral Prayer

Where would we be, O God, without your compassion?
Who could stand before your judgment?

Yet you promised that you would never forsake us. You sent Christ as a sign of your faithfulness and the seal of our salvation. He is a haven of hope and a source of rest for souls weary from strife and wrongdoing. We give thanks that he dwells by your side, there to intercede for us as we offer our prayers.

We pray for the young, who begin life in utter dependence, for the unborn and the newborn, who draw their first nourishment from another body. We are reminded of how needful we are. Give us hearts to reach out to you in our need.

We pray for those afflicted with ailments. Send Christ's healing power, which can restore them to wholeness. Use us as instruments of your mercy, so that it's us who sit with the lonely, feed the hungry, show hospitality to the stranger, and clothe the naked.

We pray for those who grieve a loss. Surround them with your compassion; care for them in their solitude, and comfort them during the lonely hours.

May they – and us – be encouraged by the ever-present Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven,

hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.