

So Hard to Find Good Help These Days¹

^{NRS} **2 Kings 5:1** 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.² 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.³ She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."⁴ So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said.⁵ 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.⁶ 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."⁷ 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."⁸ 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."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 leprosy!¹² 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.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.

^{NRS} **Mark 1:40** A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean."⁴¹ Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!"⁴² Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.⁴³ After sternly warning him he sent him away at once,⁴⁴ saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."⁴⁵ But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no

¹ This sermon was written along the lines of the classical sonata. Unlike other classical forms like the theme and variations and minuet and trio which employ a single theme, the sonata form engages two divergent themes in an attempt to find their common ground. In it's purest form the sonata structure is four-fold: exposition, development, recapitulation, and coda. I've followed this form as faithfully as possible, although where elements such as the modulating bridge in the exposition and recapitulation didn't translate well, I have opted for narrative sense over formal sensibility.

longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

Exposition

Help is a hard thing. Help is a hard thing.

Half the time, we just don't feel like helping out. I mean even when we know it's the right thing. Sometimes we're just so tired. Or we're in such a hurry, we're on the run and we just don't have time to stop.

You totally know what this is like. Last week I talked about an experience I had at Les Schwab, this week it was Fred Meyer that spoke to me. You're all going to stop saying hi to me when you see me out and about lest you end up in one of these sermon. Well this week I was at ol' Freddie's, and I was the last person to enter into an aisle when the check out person turned her light off and said I'd be the last one. She looked absolutely beat and said she was finally done with 12 hours. 12 hours of checking groceries- just think about that. And she had turned her light out, but she hadn't put the little bar up on the counter saying the aisle is closed. And right behind me comes this woman who just starts putting her groceries on the aisle. "Oh, I said," trying to be helpful, "she's closed. Her light's off." And the woman absolutely glared at me, like something out of the exorcist. Inside I was like "Uh oh..." and I started to hear the Darth Vader theme song playing in my head. And she snapped at me and saying, "Well it doesn't say closed, and I'm already putting my groceries down." Well I didn't know what to say- I pretty angry about it, and I was probably going to say something I would regret when, in this achingly tired voice, a voice too tired to fight, the checker just looked

at her and sighed and said, "Fine, you'll be the last one." And she asked me to put the closed sign down on the counter.

That poor checker. She didn't want to help. She'd been helping- for 12 hours. And she just didn't feel like it anymore. Who could blame her? I mean you know what this is like. You've had a long day. You're tired. You've taken all the calls you can take- you've done all the paperwork you can do, and then, just when you're ready to leave, there's that person who calls or emails or steps in, who just has that one little thing. "That's ok, right?" they say, not really asking.

You just don't feel like helping anymore.

But then the other half of the time, well it's the opposite. Sometimes it isn't that we don't want to help, sometimes it's that someone is trying to help us- but it's hard for us to receive it. You know, whether it's our pride, or maybe we just have an idea of what help is supposed to look like, and when somebody reaches out in a way that doesn't match- it's hard to see it..

This reminds me of our massive weight loss industry. I mean I would say pretty much everyone and their dog knows what is honestly helpful when it comes to losing weight- we have to eat less and exercise more. It's really pretty simple. Thing is we're not interested in this help. We're just not. What we want is for someone to tell us we can do something or take something that will just kind of fix everything. The next time you travel and you're flipping through that mail order catalog they always have in the seat, keep your eyes peeled for the amazing weight loss machine. It's like 40,000 dollars and it's this freaky looking Rube Goldberg contraption, and it promises you that if you use this thing for 5 minutes a day you'll lose all the weight you'll ever need. And I'm always

like scanning for the fine print that warns of people being killed by this thing and the 500 calories of tree bark you would have to eat for the 5 minute work out to actually make you lose weight. Our doctors give us all the help we could want. We want to lose weight. Eat less. Exercise more. But we don't want this help. This is too simple. We want crazy herbs and Allis.

So half the time we don't feel like helping, and half the time we don't want to receive the help that's being offered. Help is just a hard thing.

Development

In our readings this morning we see both ends. In Mark Jesus plays the role of our tired grocery checker, fed up with healing and wanting to start preaching, when this annoying, annoying leper busts in on him.

And in the 2 Kings text Naaman wants help, he wants someone to cure his leprosy, but when the prophet Elisha tells him all he has to do is wash himself in the Jordan River, he's like, "Are you kidding me? Don't you know who I am?" Naaman isn't about to go and take a dip in the Jordan- he wants special treatment. He wants Elisha to come out, to lay hands on him, to mumble some crazy Hebrew prayer. Nothing as simple, as humbling, as plain ol' water. Naaman's being offered help, and he's completely uninterested in it- even offended by it.

Well we'll start with Jesus. See, Jesus doesn't really want to heal this guy. Now I know, our translation says that Jesus had mercy on the leper, stretched out his hand, and he healed him. Sounds like he wanted to do it. What am I talking about?

Well, bear with me for a minute. Some of you know that we don't actually have the original manuscripts of the New Testament. Like there's no museum or library where you can go and find the papyri that Mark himself actually wrote. No, the earliest things we have date from the 2nd century- decades later than Mark was written. So the way we figure out what the best Greek text is, since we don't have the original, is we get all the ones we have and line them up. Now most of the time things line up pretty good- the Greek looks pretty much the same from text to text. But sometimes there are differences- differences we call variants. And when there are variants scholars have to make choices as to what's the best reading. And there are over 5,000 variants or differences in the New Testament, so this is so small thing. Well here in Mark 1:41, when you look at all the ancient manuscripts we have, about half of them say that Jesus had pity on the guy and stretched out his hand. But half say something very different- half of them say that Jesus was angry and stretched out his hand. Now pity and anger are two VERY different things, are they not. And I'm sorry to say that our translation this morning, the NRSV, while mostly it's pretty good, sometimes it's a little wimpy. And I think this is precisely one of those times. See, we say Jesus has pity, and we yawn. Of course he does. That's what he's like. But we say that Jesus was filled with anger when this guy interrupts him- and this is something totally different.

But it makes all the sense in the world! See in the text just before this, the one we heard last Sunday, Jesus tells us exactly what he wants to be doing. After the whole dang town came out, and he healed a ton of people already, he went out to pray, trying to get his strength up, when the disciples come to get him to find out the plan. And he tells them the plan. And he's as plain as he can be. He says, "Let us go on the other towns so

that I might proclaim my message, for that is what I am coming out to do.” Let us go so that I can go proclaim, go preach. This is what I’m going to do now.

See Jesus is done with all the healings and the miracles at least for a little bit- now it’s time to do some preaching. He wants to proclaim his message, literally proclaim the Gospel, or the good news. I mean he’s as clear as he possibly can be.

But then here comes this incredibly annoying leper like that woman at the Fred Meyer sneaking in at the last minute, begging him, even kneeling at his feet- “Please, Jesus- just one more.” I don’t know what the Greek is for “And then Jesus sighed and rolled his eyes”, but I really wish Mark would have put that in here.

Jesus is tired of this- he wants to be doing something different. Not to mention the fact that if Jesus does decide to touch the leper, in the eyes of the law, not only will the leper still be unclean because Jesus isn’t a priest, but now Jesus himself will be unclean, too. If people find out, he wouldn’t be allowed into synagogues, he wouldn’t be allowed to preach. So to have anything to do with this leper would jeopardize Christ’s entire mission.

No, it makes all the sense in the world that when this leper comes sneaking in Jesus is angry, he’s frustrated. And we know what this is like. Sometimes we just don’t want to help, you know? We’re just done. And we feel bad, but hey, there’s only so much you can do, right?

A few years ago a Princeton psychologist conducted a really sneaky study. He was trying to figure out whether our beliefs really make us more moral or not- or whether our morality might have to do with, shall we say, baser motives. And so, and I’ll simplify here for the sake of clarity, the study went something like this. A ton of

seminarians were selected to go give a lecture on the parable of the Good Samaritan to undergraduate students in religion at the Princeton campus. Now you remember the parable of the good Samaritan. A guy is beaten up and left for dead. And a priest walks by him doing nothing. Then a Levite walks by and does nothing. And these are the good guys, right? These are the guys you would expect would help. But then a Samaritan, and Samaritans were considered no good low lifes in the day, a Samaritan comes by and he picks the man up, takes him to a hotel, pays for his room, pays for his care- all out of his own pocket. And Jesus' nasty punchline- the priests all say God teaches us to love our neighbor, but who was the neighbor to this man?

So then half of these seminarians were met by a helper who told them they had plenty of time to make it to the class. And half of them were met by a helper who told them they were late- late, late, late, and the professor HATED it when anyone was late. And then all of them were lead by the same way, and they call came upon a man who was hired by the psychologist pretending to be terribly ill. He was bent over and clutching at himself, in obvious distress. And as the seminary would pass the man would even ask for help. Now, these are all seminarians, Princeton Seminarians- people who are supposed to be caring, right? Surely, whether they felt they were late or not, surely ALL of them would stop, and help this man, and take him inside, or call an ambulance, or something. Surely they'd all help right?

Well can you guess what happened? Nearly to a person, if the seminarian felt like they had time- they would stop and help. Some of them helped more than others, but pretty much all of them stopped. But the ones who were told they were late- they passed by the guy like he wasn't even there. In fact the study pointed out with incredulity that

once, the man was actually lying down crying for help, and one seminarian was in such a hurry actually had to jump over the guy, like he was doing the Heisman over the guy.

Oh, it's embarrassing to say it. We don't like to admit it. But sometimes even when we know what the right thing is- we just don't want to do it. We're tired. We're in a hurry. We just don't want to help.

Ah, but then sometimes we're in a different spot. Sometimes the shoe is on the other foot for us, and it isn't that we don't want to help- but it's that we're being offered help, and it's help we really don't want, or help that's hard for us to accept. And this is where Naaman comes in, right?

Oh Naaman. This is such a great story. Naaman is this incredibly powerful, wealthy, general from Aram- and the Arameans at the time were just absolutely handing the Israelites their tails to them in battle. Aram was on top. So things were great for Naaman, except, except he had this little terrible problem. Somewhere, somehow, he contracted leprosy. You know at first it was just a spot or two- and he thought maybe it would just go away. But it didn't. The spots grew. And more spots started to develop. Now leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease, is caused by a bacteria, and it causes lesions on the skin and if it affects the air passages can even be fatal. I don't know where this came from but leprosy doesn't actually cause body parts to fall off- it does disfigure a person and is highly contagious, so you can imagine how such people were treated in a world without antibiotics. So when Naaman's at the top of his game and things are so bright he's got to wear shades- he winds up with this terrible infection that's threatening to destroy everything.

But he's lucky. Naaman is such a good general his king doesn't want to lose him. And so his king sends him to Israel for healing, even sending a note to Israel's king telling him to help. And Israel's king, knowing God isn't just ordered about is terrified about what might happen, but Elisha, the great prophet and healer, tells him not to worry. And you know what happens next. Naaman comes in his caravan of black SUV's with black tinted windows. And they come to Elisha's tent. And what does Elisha do? Well he doesn't even come out. He doesn't even acknowledge the presence of this great man. He just sends his assistant out to tell Naaman to go and wash himself in the Jordan River.

And Naaman? Well all the commentators agree- Naaman is furious. For me, he says, for me I thought Elisha would at least come out. Naaman wants Elisha to at least come out and do whatever voodoo he's going to do. And to just wash himself in the river? Naaman is incensed- he's seen the muddy Jordan. He didn't travel all that way just to dunk his head in the river.

And I agree he sounds angry. But you know what I think? I think Naaman isn't just angry- he's embarrassed and he's ashamed.

I mean here is this powerful, powerful man- now his face now covered in lesions. And he comes to this little tent where the healer won't even come out to see him. And all of Naaman's servants are there watching all of this. This is incredibly painful, incredibly embarrassing. And worse- to be told to simply go and wash himself in a river like any normal person, in front of all these people. This was too much to ask- this cure was worse than the disease.

Oh Elisha offered help. But it's not help that Naaman wants. It's not the kind of help a man like him can accept.

In 1935 at the height of the great depression in Canton, Ohio the town newspaper, The Repository, published a letter just around holiday season. The letter was from a man calling himself B. Virdot, and in the letter he offered financial help to anyone who would write to him and describe their situation. It turns out B. Virdot was the made up name of a man who at one point had a great fortune, had lost that fortune, but by the time of the Great Depression was wealthy again. And knowing the sting of poverty, and know how hard it is to ask for help, he wanted to give people an anonymous way to ask for and receive help- a way that preserved their dignity. The identity of the man remained a mystery until only recently.

A man named Ted Gup was going through the home of his mother after she died. And in the attic he came across an old chest. After opening it he found it full of letters, letters to B. Virdot, and check receipts, all signed by B. Virdot. This man gave nearly \$1,000 dollars anonymously at the one of the hardest times in our country's history, an enormous sum at the time- and he did it because he knew what it was like to be in need, he knew how hard it was to receive help.

One of the letters from an out of work steel worker who was stricken with tuberculosis. Only he wasn't writing for himself, but for his boy- whose skull was fractured after being hit by a car and they had no money for a doctor. This man writes: "For one like me who for a lifetime has earned my living, charity is an abomination. However, your offer carries with it a spirit so far removed from those who offer help for their own glorification, you remove so much of the sting and pain of forced charity that I venture to tell you my story."

Oh it's hard, sometimes impossible for us to ask for and receive help. And sometimes even when we do want help, when it doesn't come in the way we expect- sometimes we can't even see it.

Recapitulation

The good news is that when we can't receive help, or when we're too tired to give it- God is our help. God is our refuge and our help.

Even though he was angry- Jesus stretched out his hands towards that leper crying out, "I do choose. Be made clean."

Even though Naaman acted like an arrogant jerk, Elisha didn't take away his offer. And when Naaman swallowed his pride and lowered himself into that muddy water- when he came up, somehow, somehow, he came out clean.

Coda

This day and this week- help when you can. This day and this week- receive help with grace. And when we can't, when we're too tired, too busy, or too ashamed- may you remember that God abides with you still, living, and moving around and within you're able to do what needs to be done. **Amen.**