

12 February 2012  
Epiphany 6

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Mr. Clean”

Text: Mark 1:40-45; 2 King 5:1-14; 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Two men. They couldn't be more the same. They couldn't be more different.

The first man was a great man, a man of valor, the commander of the army of the king of Syria and highly regarded and valued by the king. His name was Naaman, and he had contracted leprosy, which in those days was a death sentence. Usually a long, slow death sentence. The kind of death no one wants to die. Most people want death to come quickly, preferably while they're sleeping, so we don't have to think about it and dwell on it, I suspect. You didn't have that option with leprosy.

The second man, he was a leper too, Mark tells us. We don't know his name, though. He probably was just an ordinary Joe, with a regular job and a family he tried his best to care for. He went to church every Sunday, was friendly and helped his neighbors, and didn't kick the dog. But his leprosy changed all that. This contagious disease made him a quarantined outcast, which was probably like a death before death - you lost everything and then waited with your fellow lepers to die.

And so they were the **same** in this regard, those two men. Though one was high and one seems low, one extraordinary and one quite ordinary, leprosy was an equal opportunity nightmare. Both needed help.

The first man, Naaman, when he finds out there is the possibility of healing in Israel, sets out with a letter from his king and more money than most folks will see in their lifetime: **10 talents of silver**, which is about 750 pounds, worth today roughly \$400,000. **6,000 shekels of gold**, which is about 2,400 ounces, worth today roughly \$4 million. **And ten changes of clothing**. You know, I used to laugh at that - 10 changes of clothing! What is that compared to all that money? - until I was in Kenya about this time three years ago. I found out that not only had none - *not one* - of those pastors ever *had* ten changes of clothing, they had *never even seen* ten changes of clothing. That, too, was quite a luxury. . . . So Naaman comes to Israel and Israel's God with only one thing on his mind: he needs healing, and he is going to pay whatever it takes to get it.

The second man, well, he didn't have such riches. He was probably one of those people who had never even seen ten changes of clothing. But he needed healing just as much as Naaman; maybe even more. So what was he to do? . . . Well, what he does is come to the God of Israel standing before him in the person of Jesus Christ, and begs. He kneels, he implores, *Lord, have mercy!* ***Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.***

And so they were quite **different** in this regard, those two men. One determined, the other hopeful. One armed to the teeth with wealth, the other armed only with faith.

I thought about that a bit . . . and I wondered: which am I more like? Which are you more like? Do we come before God with who we are and what we have? Or do we come before God as beggars? Kneeling and imploring, *Lord, have mercy!*

*The answer, I suspect, is both.* Sometimes we're like Naaman, expecting God to answer our prayers because of who we are, how good we've been, how much we've given. You've tried hard to live a Christian life, you've paid your dues, you deserve better than cancer, than family problems, than the struggles that never seem to end. . . . But then there are times, too, where all we can do is cry out, *Lord, have mercy!* 'Cause we got nothin'. We know we're not good, but full of sin. We know there's nothing we have that God needs. And we know there's no sense, in fact, of promising anything if God were to help us - we'd fail at that, too. *Lord, have mercy.* That's all we got.

And the "epiphany" in this story today is that's enough; our Lord is merciful. Sorry, Naaman! Who you are and what you got makes no difference - go, wash, and be *clean*. And sorry, Joe! Who you *aren't* and what you *don't* have makes no difference - ***I will; be clean.*** *What makes the difference is not anything in these two men - what makes the difference is who our Lord is and what He has come to do.* And so both men are, in mercy, made clean; completely clean. Naaman's flesh, in fact we are told, is ***restored like the flesh of a little child.*** For when Jesus restores, it is never half-way, but all the way. Back to pristine. Back to Paradise.

And now also for you. Also to you Jesus has said, ***I will; be clean.*** To heal you from the leprosy of your sin. For sin is the incurable nightmare that afflicts us. Sin is our death sentence, robbing us of life, separating us one from another. Satan doesn't want you to think sin is so bad, and so he belittles sin in order to belittle our Saviour. He doesn't want you to think you sin is so bad, and he wants to convince you that you can cover it up with the good you do. But that's like putting make up on leprosy - you may look okay on the outside, but the disease is still eating you away. And it will win if it's not dealt with. Satan is a liar, and he always will be, to

the very end.

And so Jesus has provided a water of cleansing for you, that like Naaman, you may *go, wash, and be clean*; that like Joe, He may touch you and cleanse you. And when you are baptized, that's exactly what happens. All your uncleanness washed away in the forgiveness of your sins. Not because the water is so great - that was Naaman's objection, remember? *What's so great about the Jordan?* What's so great about the water in the font of baptism? Well, *nothing*. It's not the water, but the Word and promise of God attached to the water, that if Naaman washed in the Jordan, that if you wash here, you will be touched by Jesus and you will be clean.

That's why infant baptism is such a great thing! Babies bring nothing to the font, they can't even bring themselves - they have to be carried. But that's exactly the point. It was all the Lord with Naaman, it was all Jesus with Joe, and it is all Jesus here. All the work of the Lord. It is His touch, His washing, His healing, His giving spiritual life. All the baby, and all we can do, is receive it. For that is why Jesus came. To come to us sinners with His: ***I will, be clean.***

750 talents of silver, 6,000 shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing can't buy that. For really, what is all that, no matter how much it's worth, compared to the life of the Son of God, which He offered on the cross for the sin of the world? And then to give us the gift of baptism, where by His Word and promise He says: *that will be your death and resurrection*. I am the One who *really* suffered and died, who *really* paid the price for your sin, and then rose victorious from the dead, but now by My Word and promise, *all that will be yours in this washing*. This will be the death due your sin. This will be your resurrection to a new life. This will be your cleansing. ***I will; be clean.***

Now, there are plenty of modern-day Naamans, who say water can't do that; that's it's empty; that it's just water. Many who want something more spectacular and awe-inspiring. But what can be more precious or great than this? That our Saviour puts Himself here for you. That His life is here for you, and for your children, and for all who are far off. As Naaman's servant said: ***This is a great word.*** A simple message, a simple washing, but a great salvation.

So despite how these two men may have been quite different, in the end, what mattered most is what made them the same - they were dying and needed life. And that is what makes all of us the same as well. And for all the same, the Lord of life has come. So that whether you're a Naaman or a Joe or somewhere in between, you have a merciful Saviour - the Lord of life who came to die, so that the dying have life. The holy one come to become unclean, so that the unclean be holy. Who has come to say to you: ***I will. I forgive you. You are clean. You are mine.***

And so really this is not the story of two men after all - but of one man. That one man who not only washes you and gives you life, but is now here for you with His Body and Blood to feed and strengthen you in that life. That one man who, as we sang, came to make God manifest to us. That whether you came here a Naaman or a Joe, you are raised a Christian - one for whom Jesus died, and in whom Jesus now lives and mercies and loves and forgives. That it may be as we concluded that hymn:

*Grant us grace to see Thee, Lord,  
Present in Thy holy Word -  
Grace to imitate Thee now  
And be pure as pure art Thou;  
That we might become like Thee  
At Thy great epiphany  
And may praise Thee, ever blest,  
[the] God in man made manifest.* ( LSB #394 v. 5)

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.