

It Has To Be That Way

I was a history major in college and on the very first day of class, the very first words out of the professor's mouth were: "History is written by the winners, by the strong, by the victorious."

What he wanted us to know right from the start is that what is handed down as the way things are supposed to be comes directly from the perspective of those on top.

And those on top are always quite clear that whatever they do, they do it because it has to be done that way.

This is true for the Egyptians who used Jewish slaves to build the pyramids, and the Romans who sacked and burned their way to an empire, throughout the intrigues of the Middle Ages, right up to the fire bombing of Dresden in World War II, and the annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with atomic bombs.

It has to be done that way.

You can't read the morning paper without seeing much of the same.

Mr. Romney has to go negative against Mr. Gingrich and Mr. Santorum because "that's how you get to be president" -- it has to be done that way.

Mr. Obama goes back on a pledge to forgo the Super-Pacs that allow a few very rich companies to exert enormous influence on politicians because "we can't unilaterally disarm" -- it has to be done that way.

And our lessons today, one from the Book of Kings, the other from Mark's gospel, are just brimming with "it has to be done that way."

You've got to love the story of Naaman.

I picture him as Donald Trump's long ago great-grandfather, with flaming orange hair waving in the breeze, flaming orange hair sitting atop a massive ego.

Naaman is rich, he's powerful, he's in with the powers that be, and he knows, oh how he knows, that he's God's gift to humanity!

But Naaman's got a problem.

Leprosy in Naaman's day was treated like we treated our victims of this disease until the 1960's.

If you're infected, whether you're 6 or 60, it's off to Kalaupapa with you, far from everyone and everything you hold dear.

Naaman hears of a cure.

News of the cure comes by way of a Jewish slave girl, booty from Naaman's last raid on Israel.

Instead of delighting in Naaman's quandary, this young Jewish girl tells of a prophet who will cure the foreign general for free.

But that's not how things are done.

Forget about free and forget about seeing the prophet.

Naaman loads up his riches and heads for the king of Israel's place.

After all, generals deal with kings, not with some trailer park prophet.

The king is himself upset.

He knows the way things are done, and they don't include healing a nasty disease like the one afflicting this foreign general.

The general must be up to something, the king reasons, because that's the way things are done.

Meanwhile, the prophet, sitting in his doublewide mobile home several miles from the palace, gets wind of what's going on and sends for the general.

You know the story.

The general shows up at the Mountain View Trailer Park, with his whole entourage of horses and limousines and bankers ready to write big fat checks.

Naaman expects "abra cadabra," and he's willing to do bizarre contortions, and pay, but what he gets is the houseboy of the trailer park prophet telling him to dunk in the muddy river just down the road.

And by the way, no charge.

That's not how it's done, Naaman fumes!

Only when another low life, this time Naaman's courageous servant, who coaxes Mr. Big Shot to do as he's told, only then is he cured, only then is he healed.

You know, the wonderful thing about the collection of books and short stories that we call the Bible is that unlike the history I got in my college classes, the Bible tells the story of our relationship with God more often than not from the point of view of the losers.

Not "LOSERS!" like one kid calls another as a put down these days, but the folks who lose the battles, or who are taken as slaves, the people who really are the silenced outcasts.

Seeing life from their point of view, well, all of a sudden, the old stand by of "It has to be that way" suddenly finds itself on very thin ice indeed.

Naaman, it turns out, doesn't need his connections or his reputation or his fabulous orange hair to get what he needs.

He only needs to need, and our gracious God meets his need.

There are, in this story, and in our own lives, two realities that exist and beckon us for our attention, our trust.

The reality we most often look to is the so-called real world, as we like to call it; the world of conquering nations, powerful elites and political savvy.

It's Namaan's world before he takes that dip in the Jordan and has his eyes opened.

It's the politicians' world as they vent hyper-partisan hyperbole.

It is often our Monday through Saturday world as we each of us seek to muddle through as best we can.

And yet, the Reality that our faith calls us to is one in which real power, real miracle, is found in the kind advice of a servant girl and in the quiet trust that God really is God.

The Reality that our faith calls us to is found in a willingness to give up in order to have, to surrender in order to prevail, to die in order to live.

And the question becomes, which Reality truly holds the power?

As if to answer that question, Jesus comes face to face with the man suffering from leprosy.

The man is an outcast due to religious tradition, consigned to ancient Israel's version of Kalaupapa.

It's a regrettable situation, but it has to be that way.

And while our translation this morning tells us that Jesus is "moved with pity" in the face of the man's request for healing, in fact the more complete meaning from the original language is that his pity is mixed with anger, even outrage.

You can translate it as Jesus literally "snorting with indignation."

Not snorting with indignation at the man before him, but at the religious institution that has thrown this child of God into the wilderness, excluding him from the common life of the community, because it has to be that way.

And even more, it seems that Jesus is angry at the very thought that he might NOT wish the man to be clean.

Again, not that he is angry at the man himself, but at the system that has taught him that God might desire, that God might be the cause, of his illness, *that he might somehow deserve this suffering.*

That thought, it seems, outrages Jesus.

A minister puts it like this:

"This is a healing story with passion in it.

It is not just any healing story.

Jesus is frustrated and upset when he heals the man; and in the process of healing him, Jesus breaks down walls that have been carefully built and scrupulously preserved by well-meaning religious types, when he touches the leper.

He dares to do the unconventional, in fact, the unlawful, so that he may accomplish the unlikely." J. Walton, Jesus Iconoclast.

He sends the cleansed man back to the priest not in some kind of homage to the priest, but to confront the priest with holy defiance, showing him that laws and codes for cleanliness are not the way things have to be; that touching the untouchable, and welcoming the unwelcome, and embracing the unembraceable: that is the reality of God in this world.

In both Naaman and Jesus' encounter today, we as disciples of Jesus are confronted with the hard lesson that compassion is not simply a state of mind, it requires action.

Compassion, for a disciple of Jesus, means breaking down all barriers between people, whether those barriers be religious, social, economic or political.

In that way, human need embraces God's liberating mercy.

And there is this.

The church is called to witness to the true Reality that is God's presence in the world; a presence that looks like yeast, or mustard seeds, a presence readily seen by young servant girls, and often missed by generals.

So the next time you hear someone say: "It has to be that way," remember the trailer park prophet and Naaman; remember the

outraged Jesus and the man with leprosy; and politely suggest to that someone, that, perhaps, there is another way.

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