6/29-30/19 The Power of Obedience Rev. Amy Haines

2 Kings 5:1-14

Economist Ken Galbraith once shared a story of the obedience of his family's housekeeper, Emily Wilson. He wrote,

..It had been a wearying day, and I asked Emily to hold all telephone calls while I had a nap.

Shortly thereafter the phone rang. Lyndon Johnson was calling from the White House.

"Get me Ken Galbraith. This is Lyndon Johnson."

"He is sleeping, Mr. President,” she replied. “He said not to disturb him."

"Well, wake him up. I want to talk to him."

"No, Mr. President. I work for him, not you.”

When Galbraith later called the President back, Lyndon Johnson could scarcely control his pleasure. The President eagerly replied, "Tell that woman I want her here in the White House."

--John Kenneth Galbraith, A Life in Our Times, Reader's Digest, 12-81.

sermonillustrations.com: obedience, adapted

Imagine if you were that housekeeper—would you have obeyed your employer if the President was on the phone?

Obedience means we are yielding to the authority of another. If we obey someone else, it means we are giving up what we want for what they want. We are following their requests rather than our own desires.

When in your life have you chosen who to obey and who to disobey? When in your life have you chosen to follow the rules, and when have you chosen to break the rules?

We may obey the rules of the law to not cause injury to another person, yet how many of us disobey the rules of the road by viewing speed limits as optional?

We may yield to the authority of our bosses at work, yet how many times do we then try to find a way around what they want us to do?

Many of us here today can recite the 10 Commandments, and know that Jesus calls us to love God and love neighbor. In what ways have you lived for God in your relationships with others?

In what ways have you turned away from God, refusing to follow God’s ways or struggling to live by God’s ways in the midst of the pressures of home, work and society?

Years ago at a community Vacation Bible School, I taught the kids our key verse from John 14:15: “If you love me, obey my commandments.” In response to learning that verse, one older girl remarked, “That is harsh.” I replied that the words came from Jesus, and she still believed that they were hard words to live by. At first, I was surprised by the girl’s words. But really, she’s right.

If we love Jesus, we are called to follow Jesus. If we are followers of Jesus, then we are called to live by his commandments. We live by his commandments because we trust, and we obey.

And when we obey, we commit to following God’s ways, not our own ways. Yet those ways are not easy.

We are called to cross boundaries to care for all God’s children, especially the widow and orphan. We are called to speak up against injustice, and refuse to participate in the “–isms” of our world. We are called to give generously rather than hoard our resources. We are called to make time to gather and serve and study and fellowship together as the church. We are called to love instead of hate.

Yet obedience does not come naturally to us. Full obedience takes time. It is the process of daily choices that choose to follow the ways of God instead of our selfish desires.

In our biblical story today, no one knew the cost of obedience better than a foreign military hero who lived hundreds of years before Jesus, an army commander named Naaman.

Naaman was a mighty warrior, a great man who was in high favor with the King of Aram, whose kingdom was located in what is now modern day Syria. Naaman knew what it meant to obey orders from his king. He also knew what it meant to have others obey his orders, especially in the heat of battle. Often obedience for him meant the difference between life and death.

Naaman’s life was full of power, prestige and success—except for one aspect of life that he could not control. Naaman was afflicted with a skin disease which bothered him greatly and could lead to him being socially ostracized.

I imagine like many of us Naaman would have gone to doctor after doctor seeking a cure.

He would have prayed to all the gods of Aram. Yet nothing and no one, so far, had cured him of his skin disease.

One day, however, news of a possible cure came from an unlikely source. A foreign servant girl served Naaman’s wife, a young Israeli woman captured in a previous battle between Syria and Israel. This young, unnamed, captive servant willingly told her mistress that Naaman could be cured by the prophet of Samaria.

Now, not many warriors would put much faith in the prophets and religious leaders of their enemies. Naaman was different. This military man of power decides to risk his reputation and believe the words of a foreign servant girl.

Naaman then risks ridicule by sharing her conviction of a cure with his king. The king of Aram, surprisingly, supports Naaman’s quest. He sends Naaman forth with a letter to the king of Israel and enough gifts to make any man sit up and take notice of the wealth.

But what happens when Naaman meets the king of Israel? The Israeli king thought the king of Aram was seeking to start a war. He saw the gifts and the letter as a trap: “Heal him or die.”

The Israeli king became so distraught he began to tear his clothing in sorrow. If it was not for the Israeli expectation of hospitality to foreigners and strangers, Naaman may have ended up a dead man that day at the hands of the enemy king.

The prophet of Samaria, the man of God known as the prophet Elisha, heard about Naaman’s request and his king’s sorrow. He sent a message to the king of Israel to send Naaman to him.

I imagine the king was more than happy to quickly obey Elisha’s request.

Naaman traveled from the King of Israel to the house of Elisha, and instead of being greeted personally by the great prophet Elisha, was greeted only by an unnamed servant with this instruction: “Go to the River Jordan and immerse yourself seven times. Your skin will be healed and you’ll be good as new.”

Notice Elisha never appeared to Naaman face to face. Elisha knew that Naaman, as a man of power, would equate the power of healing with the man who performed the healing, not with the God who heals. Elisha wanted God to have all the credit.

Yet Naaman—he wanted a show. He wanted the lowly prophet of his enemy Israel to emerge, snap his fingers, and “poof”, dramatically cure his skin disease. So he pouted. He raged. Being a man of power, Naaman wanted a show of power. He wanted a God, or at least a prophet, who would do his bidding much like the servants and soldiers who followed his orders. Immediately. Decisively. His way. Naaman wanted healed on his own terms. He did not want to obey the terms of a foreign god and a foreign prophet and wash in the muddy waters of the inferior Jordan River.

How often do we pout and rage like Naaman when God wants us to do the unexpected? How often do we refuse to obey when what we are called to do seems so beneath us or so not like us? How often do we rant and rave against following God’s Word even in the little things of life? How often does our pride get in the way of our faith?

..Mark LaRocca-Pitts, once Staff Chaplain at the Athens Regional Medical Center in Georgia, observes how many people behave when diagnosed with a serious illness.

“Armed with preapprovals from our HMOs, we seek out a specialist who can cure us. The more renowned the doctor, the higher are our expectations. We expect the doctor to display the full range of his or her mysterious craft by utilizing umpteen procedures, tests and exams. But, ... instead, the doctor breezes in and breezes out, telling you that all you really need to do is take this medication as prescribed, or, even worse, telling you simply to watch your diet and exercise. Fuming furiously, you wonder why you went to all this trouble.

‘Didn’t the last doctor say the same thing? Tell me to go to the Mayo Clinic, or tell me that if I undergo a very risky, difficult and experimental procedure, I’m sure to be cured. But don’t tell me simply to “take this pill” or “change your diet.”’

In a rage we go off in pursuit of another specialist, when instead, if we only did what the doctor said we might possibly find, if not the cure, at least a healing. We should at least give it a try: Naaman did.” --Homiletics 7-4-04 adapted

Too often, like Naaman, we want a vending machine God who will answer our prayers immediately, in the way we expect. Too often, like Naaman, we want to get to our destination instantly instead of savoring the journey and what we learn along the journey.

If our destination is health and healing, we want an instant cure rather than appreciating the struggle of healing. If our destination is a white-collar job, we want the big bucks without the education and training it takes to earn those big bucks. If our destination is heaven we want the instant transformation of life rather than experiencing the teachable moments of God along the way.

Often when we obey God day in and day out, in the little decisions of life as well as the leaps of faith, our healing and transformation occurs along the way, quietly, before we ever reach whatever we perceive is our destination.

Naaman wanted healed on his terms, according to his expectations. Yet in order for Naaman to be healed, Naaman had to put aside his own pride and control to trust someone else and follow their instruction.

Naaman had to be reminded by his servants that the price of obedience is sometimes doing the little things of life, not making a big production of our faith or healing.

Finally, he calmed down, swallowed his pride and obeyed the instruction of the prophet Elisha.

Naaman washed not once, not twice but seven times in the lowly Jordan River. Sure, the river was not the greatest. Sure, washing in the river was not a hard chore.

Yet in order for Naaman to be healed, he had to obey even the simplest of commands and have faith in the God who heals us body, mind, and spirit.

And wonder of wonders, his skin became good as new, the clear flesh of a young boy.

Naaman’s skin was healed, but the real transformation occurred not on his skin but within Naaman’s heart. This foreign man of military might became a believer in the God of Israel. When Naaman trusted and obeyed Elisha he also trusted and obeyed the Lord God Almighty.

And God healed him, inside and out.

Naaman’s healing reminds us that God seeks to love all of us, the insider and the outcast, the young and the old, the weak and the strong, the poor and the rich. God’s blessings are for all who will believe, trust and obey.

Many of the Jews in the time of Jesus didn’t like this story of Naaman, for it reminded them that God works beyond our boundaries. Where do you see God reaching out nowadays beyond your expected boundaries?

Unlike the boundaries we place between ourselves and others—boundaries of nationality and language, boundaries of money and status, boundaries of past hurts and future fears, boundaries of age or legal status—unlike our human boundaries, God’s love knows no boundaries.

God reaches out to each and every one of us with love and grace, forgiveness and hope.

God sent his son to die on the cross for the sins of each and every one of us.

One author commented on today’s text by saying,

“This story [today] reminds us that our salvation doesn’t reside in material goods, military might, or status; our salvation comes from the Lord who has made both the waters of Israel and the rivers of Damascus.” -p. 54 Upper Room Disciplines 2003

And if God’s love and the gift of salvation reach beyond boundaries, how is God calling us to obediently stretch beyond our comfort zones?

Remember, however, that there is a price to obedience. Many military men and women have risked and given their lives to protect the freedoms we enjoy in our beloved country. Naaman had to listen to his servants and follow the instructions of a foreign prophet in order to be healed. Jesus died on a cross in order to pay the price for our freedom from sin.

The price for our obedience, the price of living our lives following God’s ways, may be giving up control in our lives and trusting the Lord to guide us. Or our price may be allowing God to transform our lives one step at a time into the people of faith God wants us to be. Or our price may be stepping back from our timetables and expectations and allowing God to work in God’s own time and way.

For each one of us the price of obedience will be different. We may be asked to wash seven times in the Jordan River or asked to give up our time or finances sacrificially or be asked to forgive seventy times seven times from one we have wronged.

Whatever the price for our obedience to follow the Word and ways of God, we follow trusting in God’s love, God’s presence, God’s hope, God’s saving grace. We follow trusting God’s ways rather than our ways, God’s expectations rather than the world’s expectations.

..One of the great NFL quarterbacks has been Roger Staubach, who led the Dallas Cowboys to the World Championship in 1971. Yet over the years Roger freely admitted that his position as a quarterback who didn't call his own signals was a source of trial for him.

Coach Landry sent in every play. Coach told Roger when to pass, when to run and only in emergency situations could he change the play (and he had better be right!). Even though Roger considered Coach Landry to have a "genius mind" when it came to football strategy, pride said that he should be able to run his own team.

Roger later said that in order to succeed, "I faced up to the issue of obedience.Once I learned to obey there was harmony, fulfillment, and victory."

-Source Unknown. Sermonillustrations.com:obedience

Today, we are called to follow the example of Naaman, and Roger, and many faithful Christians who have gone before us, to trust in God and obey God’s ways. God does not expect obedience as a dictator; rather, God expects obedience as a loving parent, and as the Holy One who desires what is best for us.

Give thanks that God offers us many gifts of the Spirit in order to better follow God’s ways.

So far this summer we have reflected on the power of hope and the power of boldness.

Today we are reminded that the power of obedience is the power of God working in and through and among us. We are reminded that the power of obedience is the power to choose God’s ways in both the little things and big things of life, in the mundane and the dramatic.

We are reminded that the power of obedience is the willingness to participate in God’s ways here and now, and trust God to guide us to share His love and grace.

So as we go forth this week to celebrate our freedoms, in this nation and through Christ’s gift of salvation, may the ways of this world, the pressures of work, home and society, and our selfish desires not pull us away from obedience to our Heavenly Father.

May we once again hear Jesus’ call to love God and love neighbor, and trust God to guide us on how to practically live by that love.

In all that we say and do, in the dramatic and the ordinary, in all of the choices of our everyday lives, may we trust God and obey.

Let us pray.