

God's Formula for Turning Nobodies into Somebodies

2 Kings 5

The highly regarded general, Naaman, tired and hot, had traveled a long distance to see Elisha the prophet. Now he was furious. "I thought that he would surely come out to me," he fumed, "and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of leprosy." After all, Naaman was an important man. He didn't go to people; they came to him!

Instead, Elisha, a prophet of Israel, had told him to bathe in the muddy Jordan River. "Are not the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? If I'm going to be healed, why can't it be near my home, and in decent clear water?" Naaman turned and stormed off in a rage. Must have had polluted water back then also.

His servants politely pleaded with him. "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it?" (13) Those smart servants knew the general well. They knew to appeal to his pride. Also, it's clear they cared for him. Otherwise, why go to the effort to persuade him to change his mind?

Reluctantly, the great Naaman removed his weapons and medals, laid his elegant robes aside, and waded into the water. He dipped below the muddy surface six times, before the miracle occurred. As he rose to the surface the seventh time, he saw his skin restored to be like a young child's. The mighty general, who worshiped the pagan gods of his native Aram, bowed to humbly confess, "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel." (5:15)

This is one of the dramatic conversion stories in the Old Testament. The prophet Elisha usually receives credit as the hero of this great Sunday School story. But how did Naaman hear about Elisha? Who convinced him to travel to Israel from Syria in search of a cure? Who offered him hope for such a hopeless disease in those days?

Hidden in the background of this and many great testimonies is an anonymous servant of God who first planted the seeds of faith, who faithfully watered them, & who patiently waited for them

to bear fruit. It's true of my own testimony and it's true of yours. We can all name some of the people who touched us, but most likely we had many people who witnessed to us in many ways.

As we share the Gospel message with others, few of us will be the big heroes like Elisha. In fact, most of us are, anonymous slaves of Jesus. Maybe not even remembered by the people we influence toward Jesus. As we commit and seek to serve our Lord in spreading the Gospel, we will most likely not be asked to be an Elisha.

Instead, we are expected to be an anonymous servant. The Apostle Paul tells us, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So, neither he who plants, nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The woman who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to their own labor." (I Cor. 3:6-7)

Let's focus on the faithful nameless servant girl behind the scenes. She was a slave, a nobody, & her master was "commander of an army, highly regarded and a valiant soldier." She occupied the lowest rung on the social, economic, and power ladder. She had no rights. Who would listen to a simple slave girl? But she didn't allow her fear or position to hold her back. Her willingness to speak up, to offer something so ridiculous as a cure for leprosy, when there was no medically known cure, is remarkable. She offered a preposterous hope to Naaman's wife. She said, "There is a prophet who could cure Naaman."

Would we have the courage to speak up in the servant girl's situation? Would we take the chance to speak with someone with absolute power over us? Would we even care about our slave master? Or would we hope Naaman's leprosy makes his life miserable and leads to a painful death? Why would we think a distant prophet would want to help an enemy soldier?

Do you remember speaking up about Jesus, the Gospel or a value of the Gospel? Have you ever found yourself defending Jesus or explaining the hope you have in Him? Or do we too often stay quiet? It's easy to go with the flow, not making

people angry, smoothing things over so we keep the peace, and we stay at our comfort levels. I suspect the primary Mennonite cultural sin is upsetting anyone, making us uncomfortable. Asking difficult questions. Pointing out why something may be wrong. Defending a view that threatens people's ideas of practical theology. A common reason for not speaking about Jesus and His values is: we don't want to offend anyone.

And from another direction - Do we remember anyone speaking up to us, about our views or behavior, about Jesus and about Jesus' values? Maybe it was a friend or our parents or someone whose job it was to talk about Jesus? Like a Christian school teacher or in Sunday School? Even a non-believer who got us to think.

One of my sharpest experiences was as I arrived home, got out of the Kombi in the garage, with my dad, our Taiwanese driver & an older teen - the son of a missionary who lived with us. I used the word Chink, to describe Chinese people. I remember how Dad and Tony lit into me about how wrong & inappropriate that word was. Both immediately, without hesitation, called me out. Both held nothing back. You could say, it scared me for life in a good way. It made me aware of racism and how I was being influenced to be a racist. I learned by being confronted.

These people were not nobodies in my life, but the point of the servant girl still stands. Maybe God uses "nobodies" because they understand what is right and the source of their strength. Maybe we get so sophisticated & think we have so much to lose if we open our mouths, that we fear to speak up? But God said to Moses when he resisted speaking to Pharaoh, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak." (Ex. 4:11-12)

God made that promise to Moses, a murderer, and an anonymous shepherd. We know about Moses now - because he reluctantly followed his call to lead the people of Israel out of slavery. But otherwise, who would know who Moses was? God faithfully provides the words once we

determine to open our mouths in **spiritual boldness**. So many of the Bible's characters were first, nobodies by some definition. But we know about them because they allowed themselves to be used by the Almighty. This is not just any kind of courage. It's spiritual courage.

Another important thought to note besides the servant girl's spiritual boldness is, **we don't see any self-pity**. Few of us have suffered what she did. Captured by enemy soldiers; possibly raped; exiled to a foreign country; needed to learn a new language; forever separated from her family and familiar surroundings; forced into another culture; & consigned to a lifetime of slavery. She had good reason to engage in self-pity, be bitter, and hate the people she was serving. Her life was totally changed because of Naaman's army.

If I was forced to endure all of this, I would probably consider it justice if Naaman died of leprosy. I might even rejoice! But this slave girl gives us no evidence she shared this hate filled attitude by her actions. In an astounding act of **compassion, kindness, and forgiveness**, she offered a sick enemy a chance to live. "If only my master would see the prophet in Samaria!"

All of us know people who have been terribly wounded. Marriage betrayal, an evil employer, children who refuse responsibility for their own situations, and untrustworthy co-workers. The list is endless. But the antidote is forgiveness. We marvel at the stories of people like Corrie ten Boom and Elisabeth Elliott who forgave people. History has so many examples.

In the fall of 2006, the unthinkable happened when a one-room school full of Amish children was taken hostage. Roberts bound, then shot 10 girls, killing 5 of them before turning the gun on himself. Within hours, the Amish immediately began extending their forgiveness to the gunman and visited his wife & parents to offer them comfort. They even attended the killer's funeral. A grandfather of one of the murdered girls cautioned his family not to hate the killer, "We must not think evil of this man," while another father said, "He has a mother and a wife and a soul. And now he's standing before a just God."

Erik Fitzgerald, a young pastor, preparing to be a new father to a baby boy, lost his wife along with their unborn son when the driver of the other car fell asleep at the wheel after working a long shift as an EMT. Amongst the pain & grief, Erik was overcome with concern and compassion for the young man, Matthew Swatzell. Upon hearing of the intense guilt & shame he was experiencing, Erik had the decision to pursue the case against Matthew, push for the maximum penalty or opt for a lesser charge. Erik chose the lesser charge as a chance to demonstrate God's forgiving love.

In a chance meeting arranged by fate, Erik and Matthew ran into each other at a store. Erik immediately reached out to him in an embrace & they began to talk. Since then, the two developed a deep friendship despite the circumstances that allowed them to cross paths. It's an unbelievable demonstration of forgiveness and complete restoration that only God can facilitate.

Hours after his 6-year-old daughter was gunned down in the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting, Robbie Parker bravely stood in front of cameras to publicly forgive the gunman that took his daughter & 26 other lives. With trembling voice & tear-stained face, he offered this statement on forgiveness. "We'd like to offer our deepest condolences to all the families who are directly effected by this shooting. It's a horrific tragedy and we want everybody to know that our hearts and our prayers go out to them. This includes the family of the shooter. I can't imagine how hard this experience must be for you & I want you to know that our family & our love & our support goes out to you as well. As we move on from what happened here, what happened to so many people, let it not turn into something that defines us, but something that inspires us to be better, to be more compassionate & more humble people."

The Bible has many stories like Joseph forgiving and helping his brothers and Stephen forgave those who murdered him for witnessing about Jesus. We could go on and on with story after story. And must mention Elisha's willingness to offer God's cure to an enemy commander. We must mention Jesus forgiving those who killed him. An old saying goes, love makes the world

go round, but so does forgiveness. Jesus told us, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons & daughters of your Father in heaven." (Mt. 5:44) God used a helpless slave girl, who forgave her captor.

The servant girl was spiritually courageous. She had no self-pity. She was compassionate, kind and forgave. Also, **unwavering faith was shown by the servant girl**. God was able to use her because she believed God could use Elisha to cure her earthly master. When the enemy took her captive, her situation & faith must have been severely tested. "Why did God allow this to happen to me?" "Why is my faith and trust in Him not honored enough to keep me, must less rescue me from slavery?" are normal questions.

But despite her circumstances, although God did not answer her prayers in the way she wanted, the servant girl continued to believe in the power of the Almighty. She did not say, "maybe" or Elisha "might" heal Naaman. She seems to have never doubted that God's prophet could and would cure Naaman of leprosy. We need to note the power in balance of the persons in this story. Naaman had more power than the girl. And God had more power than Naaman's gods.

The girl convinced Naaman enough that he asked two kings for help and traveled many miles to find Elisha, on the servant girl's testimony. Sure, Naaman wanted desperately to be cured, to live a normal life. But my neighbors, family members and people all over the world, are desperate for life also. When I share my faith with them, do I come across as convincing as this servant girl? Do I display her unwavering steadfast faith?

A great plot for a novel or movie would be for such a slave to set up the king's commander to be assassinated when he traveled to a foreign country. But that is not what this story is about. In fact, the opposite. The girl so desperately wanted Naaman healed, she boldly spoke up, did not wallow in self-pity, compassionately and kindly forgave him, and showed her solid faith. Did the servant girl hope Naaman would see that no other god matched Jehovah God? We don't know. But that is what occurred.

Naaman not only received healing, but he also became a believer. He declared, "I will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the Lord," he confessed. (5:17)

But Naaman recognized he could not worship two gods. So he said to Elisha, "May the Eternal One forgive me when I walk into the house of Rimmon, the storm god of Aram, to worship there beside my master – the king. As his first officer, I must be by his side wherever he goes, even when he worships. May your God forgive me for bowing down in that place."

Elisha recognized Naaman's dilemma and said, "Go & be at peace about this matter." I wonder how would we debate this response today?

So Naaman immediately recognized that he was between a rock and a hard place about who and how he worshiped. His situation may have required as much faith and boldness as the servant girl had. Back then, and even today, it's always safer and beneficial to believe & worship in the god of your country's king – whatever god or gods that might be. But his healing was clear proof of which god was most powerful. I wonder how often Naaman told his conversion story?

We also need to notice, the slave girl's faith did not develop from years of theological study, or years of faithful Sunday School attendance. Instead, it **grew out of personal experience**, from hearing and seeing what God had done through Elisha. In fact, it is probable she had received no formal education.

Jesus' disciples never attended seminary or studied textbooks on witnessing. They may have had a little bit of schooling about Old Testament and Jewish religious laws. But as we read, they simply shared their experiences with Jesus. "The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us," the apostle John testifies. "We have seen his glory," he declared. (John 1:14) Despite his rustic, hillbilly, fisherman origins, Peter preached before huge crowds in Jerusalem. He boldly testified, despite being warned to be quiet, about the Christ he knew. "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were

being saved." (Acts 2:47) When the Jewish religious leaders threaten him if he did not stop, Peter replied, "We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:20) The disciples had faith that withstood testing and persecution. The Bible and tradition inform us they spread the Good News far and wide.

As much as I am for education, like the servant girl, we don't need any special training to testify to our neighbors. Some training would help us, and some mentoring would benefit us. But we do need **spiritual boldness**, stop making excuses - **no self-pity**, be **compassionate and kind**, be **forgiverers & have unwavering faith in Jesus**. **Personal spiritual growth** also helps. Jesus tells us, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

This unknown servant girl is a sharp contrast to Elisha's servant, Gehazi. He went to Naaman to enrich himself. In turn he received the leprosy that Naaman had. It is fascinating that we know his name, but not the name of the slave girl. Is that a lesson in itself? Is there a lesson about greed here – a disease that slowly eats away at our bodies? And it is seen as being unpure.

This unknown slave girl, alone & far from home, served her earthly master each day, performing ordinary, menial tasks. But when the Almighty asked her to play a small part in His story, he found her prepared. Did Naaman show his gratitude by offering her freedom? But we know her simple witness changed Naaman's life for eternity, caused him to have a wonderful testimony, and gives the world a wonderful example of greatness.

God uses a lot of anonymous servants who faithfully, quietly work behind the scenes. They use the opportunities they have, to act and speak with spiritual boldness; they stop making excuses - no self-pity; they display kindness and compassion; and forgive as they have been forgiven, and they display an unwavering faith in Jesus. This is God's formula for turning nobodies into somebodies.

