

## “The Power of Vulnerability”

July 4, 2010

2 Kings 5:1-14

Luke 10:1-11

We come into this life vulnerable, unable to take care of ourselves. We leave this life, sometimes no longer able to take care of ourselves and sometimes suddenly unable to do anything more in this life at all.

Between those pivotal moments of vulnerability, between birth and death, we are prone to spend so much time, so much effort – so much of *ourselves* – trying to deny this inescapable, fundamental human vulnerability. Over months and years and decades, we try to run from our vulnerability to life’s surprises and challenges and pains; we try to run from our need, what gets called our “weakness.” We try to hide it from ourselves and others; we even try to obliterate it.

The ways we use to run from our vulnerability are literally endless. Some of us may accumulate academic accolades, earning degrees and certificates and awards, and we find ourselves believing that all that learning and all that recognition will protect us somehow ... from loss, from betrayal, from our human vulnerability.

Others may accumulate wealth and prestige, embracing a lifestyle that offers the illusion of protecting us from crime, from crumbling schools and crumbling health care systems. We may use our money to build literal or figurative fences and gates between us and the rest of the world’s vulnerability and need, falling for the illusion that those things are “out there,” and not “in here.”

We might also accumulate power – in business, government, the military ... even in church – worldly power that we can use to mask our lack of true power, our need for things power cannot provide, and our human frailty.

We can also hone and train and discipline our bodies – doing all the right exercises (make sure you build in aerobic, strength, and flexibility training!) and eating all the right foods – so that we can nurture the illusion that only other people are vulnerable to cancer, heart attacks, diabetes, AIDS, or any other disease that exposes our vulnerability for all (or at least part of) the world to see.

We are also powerfully prone to addiction, to embracing and then being controlled by compulsive shopping or gambling or drinking or drugs or sex or eating or anything else that can numb our awareness of our own pain and need. Conveniently, powerfully, and destructively, addiction can blot out the truth of our vulnerable humanity ... until, of course, addiction reveals us as utterly dependent, utterly lost, and in greater need than when we began to use whatever we used.

One of the things that all this tells me is that Naaman, the Aramean army commander whose story David read to us a few moments ago, is not simply a character in an ancient story in which the power of YHVH, the God of Israel, and Elisha, the prophet of Israel, is celebrated ... although he certainly is that. In addition, though, Naaman is us (or “we,” for the grammarians in the congregation), and we are Naaman.

Don’t you recognize yourself or someone you love in this figure of strength and victory, arrogance and hubris, surrender and healing? Naaman was accomplished, respected, and perhaps envied or feared for his power and military prowess. But despite all

that, there was something that neither the effectiveness of his soldiers nor the power of his king could change. There was something that neither he nor his strength and confidence could heal. He had a disease, a skin disease that separated him from others and from community.

Through a young girl of Israel, a young girl who had been captured as a spoil of war and who then became the servant – literally, the slave – of Naaman’s wife, Naaman hears of a prophet in Israel who can heal him. Not quite understanding what this young girl was describing, Naaman gets a letter from his king to the king of Israel and, loaded down with silver, gold, and garments, he travels to the king of Israel for healing. In other words, Naaman acts as if the power of kings and the power of wealth and riches will heal him. The king of Israel, though, quickly rejects any notion that he has the power to heal Naaman of his leprosy.

The prophet Elisha then enters the story and sends word that Naaman should come to him. Once again, Naaman doesn’t quite get it ... in fact, Naaman comes close to completing blowing this chance of being healed. With horses and chariots, and one supposes, still with silver, gold, and fine clothes, Naaman goes to Elisha’s house.

Elisha sends out a messenger with good news: to be healed, Naaman has only to wash himself in the River Jordan seven times. That’s all. Nothing difficult, nothing complicated, nothing, in other words, that requires any money, property, power, or prestige. Healing is possible, Elisha tells Naaman, for the simple, vulnerability-making price of exposing himself in a foreign land.

Naaman would have none of it. “Preposterous! Absurd! Offensive! Aren’t my own rivers better than all the waters of this puny country?” And in one of the earliest recorded instances of at least being ready to cut off your nose to spite your face, Naaman storms off.

But his servants intervene. Once again, it is the people who are not powerful, the people who don’t have the dubious luxury of believing that they’re not vulnerable to loss, tragedy, and pain, who open Naaman’s eyes to the truth. Just as his wife’s servant offered the good news that healing was possible, Naaman’s servants offer him the good news that healing is at hand and does not require anything more than doing what Elisha has told him to do.

Perhaps not realizing how difficult it is for a man like Naaman to do something so ordinary, so open, so *soft*, his servants say to him, “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’?” At his servants’ urging, Naaman finally relents and, indeed, is healed.

\* \* \*

How hard it can be, when we have become convinced that we must live this life on our own our steam, our own abilities, our own strength and hard work and agenda. How hard it can be, when something comes along to open our eyes to how vulnerable we are and how vulnerable we remain, no matter what protections, defenses, and delusions we use to tell ourselves otherwise. How hard it can be when someone or something comes into our lives and gives us God’s invitation to make peace with our vulnerability and to find the power of grace that can work only through our vulnerability – our need, our weakness, our limitations.

We can be like Naaman, not only uninterested in that gift of grace, but profoundly offended by the suggestion that we are anything other than strong, capable people who deserve to be treated as strong, capable people. We can be like Naaman, ready to continue to pay the painful price of pretending we are anything other than creatures in need of grace, blessing, help, and love. We can be like Naaman, willing to reject healing, if it requires us to be vulnerable. Or we can be like Naaman after his servants spoke a word of truth to him. We can be like Naaman and be willing to expose ourselves as human beings, vulnerable and in need.

\*

\*

\*

Jesus is remembered as the one who urges his disciples to live exposed, unprotected by status, wealth, or power as the world recognizes power. In this morning's reading from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is explicit. He sends seventy of his followers to go before him as he continues his journey toward Jerusalem, and he is remembered as giving this instruction: "I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals." ... I am sending you out, as vulnerable as lambs in wolf territory. Do not take the power of money or possessions. Simply take the power of your vulnerability and your offer of peace.

In a world of many dangers, toils, and snares, to use the words of John Newton in "Amazing Grace," going out unprotected, vulnerable, and offering peace can seem pretty crazy. It can seem dangerous, nearly suicidal. But the prophets and mystics in the Christian tradition and in other religious traditions throughout history keep pointing to the way of God, the divine path, the road to enlightenment as the way of openness, vulnerability, and peace. The power of vulnerability is the power of God, the power of grace, the power of holy possibility.

Through stories of old and through the stories of our lives, may we hear that invitation to discover the power of God through the power of vulnerability. And, hearing it, may we accept it in hope, faith, and love. Amen.

©Rev. Nancy Alma Taylor  
First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC  
July 4, 2010