

Seeking Welfare

There are a lot of things that might strike you about our scripture for this morning. You might find that your first reaction is to Naaman – you might find yourself thinking ‘*Jeez! This guy’s a snobby jerk!*’ Or you might find that your first reaction is to Elisha – why didn’t he just come out? How rude! Or you might find yourself noticing that God heals even those who, like Naaman, aren’t the most likeable or even the godliest of people. Or you might find yourself noticing that, in this story of kings and commanders, it’s the unnamed, powerless slaves and servants who are essential to bringing God’s miracle of health to Naaman. There are a lot of things that might strike you about our scripture for this morning.

As for me, I found myself fixated on the young slave girl, upon whom this entire story hinges. How old was she? Well, there’s no clear answer, but if you look at the root of the word for ‘young girl’ in Hebrew and how it is used in other places in the Bible, you find that it always connotes ‘youth’. It may mean young man, young woman, boy, or girl depending on how it’s inflected. And in the context of these other passages, it seems as though it refers to a child in their early teenage years or younger.

So this slave was a *kid* - middle school-aged or younger. She had been through a horrific trauma: watching as her community was raided, being ripped from her family if not witnessing their murder, and ultimately being made a slave in the house of this prominent man.

When I imagine myself at 10 or 12 years old under similar circumstances, I see overwhelming depression, fear, and anxiety. I see myself becoming either withdrawn and silent, trying to be as compliant and invisible as possible, or so angry that I cannot contain myself, lashing out in aggressive and passive aggressive ways that hurt myself as much as those around me.

But this girl...this girl doesn’t do that at all. Or at least, she doesn’t do that in this story. In this story she seeks the welfare of the man who inflicted the greatest imaginable trauma on her and her community. Can you imagine it?

Perhaps it’s evening. This slave, whom we’ll call Na’ara (the Hebrew word for young girl), is helping her mistress get ready for bed. Let’s call this older woman Isha, the Hebrew word for woman. Perhaps it’s been a few months since Na’ara was brought to this house, so she’s learned something of the ins and outs of this family. And perhaps, on this evening, Isha is crying – perhaps it’s not the first time. Na’ara understands, now, what’s going on. She’s been the witness to this older woman’s fear. After all, what if this skin disease spreads? Then Naaman would likely have to leave his job, and then where would they be? As it is, the spot already pushes them to the fringes of social circles. Most people don’t want to be around them, just in case. Most people give them as much of a cold shoulder as you can give someone who is so highly regarded by the king. And it’s worse for Naaman’s wife. After all, there’s no real reason why people *have* to respect her. If Naaman’s condition grows worse, Isha could lose *everything*. Na’ara has heard Isha anxiously run through all of these possible futures. She’s stood at the fire, tending the meal, while Naaman and his wife fight because of their fears. It never ends well for Isha. Na’ara has seen that first hand.

We might pause here and think, *well, it serves them right to be so miserable! After all, they’re oppressing this neighboring country, taking children from their families and making them slaves. And Naaman is clearly not a great dude – you can see that from the rest of the story! So why doesn’t she just let them suffer? That’s obviously what they deserve!* We might pause here and think all of this, and we wouldn’t be alone. After all, this is how the justice

system functions most of the time in much of the world. This person did this thing, so now they deserve this punishment. It's how our culture teaches us to think.

But it's not how Na'ara thinks.

So on this night, as Na'ara braids Isha's hair, she decides to speak up. Before the raid that destroyed her world, Na'ara had heard increasing talk among the adults of her village about a man named Elisha. Elisha, it seemed, was the new prophet in Israel. He was the one who took over after Elijah was taken to heaven. And to hear the adults talk of it, Elisha was every bit as connected to God as Elijah had been. Certainly, he could perform miracles! This is the news that Na'ara passes on to Isha. There is a man in Israel – a man of God, a prophet – who could certainly heal Naaman. Go to him! Go to him so that the fear may come to an end.

And Isha takes Na'ara's advice, and she passes it on to Naaman, who passes it onto the king, who eagerly sends his best commander to get healed.

Can you imagine it? This young, traumatized girl seeking the welfare of this family? It is so very countercultural in today's America. And yet, it is so very scriptural. Remember Jesus saying to love your enemies? Remember God saying to love the foreigners in your land?

What if we all strived to follow this young girl's example? And let me be clear – I'm not suggesting for a second that those who are oppressed need to heal their oppressors or that those in the minority need to heal the majority. What if we followed this young girl's example when it comes to how we view justice? What if, instead of thinking, *well, this punishment is what that guy deserves for what he did*, we asked, 'what does that guy *need* for his wellbeing? What does that guy *need* to be whole so that he might not do this thing again?'

I was thinking about this concept quite a bit this week as I heard about Marshae Jones. She's the Alabama woman who has been charged with manslaughter after another woman shot her in the stomach and caused her to miscarry her five-month-old fetus. If you haven't heard the details of this story, here they are in brief: Ms. Jones started a fight with another woman – Ms. Jemison. Ms. Jones was not armed, but Ms. Jemison was. Ms. Jemison said she feared for her life, so she took out her gun and fired a warning shot into the ground. It ricocheted and hit Ms. Jones in the abdomen, causing the death of her fetus. Ms. Jemison was cleared of all charges, though she was the one to fire the shot. Ms. Jones was indicted on manslaughter, though she was the one injured. Ms. Jones has another young daughter at home, to whom she is a dedicated mother.

What if, instead of asking who needs to be punished in this situation, we ask, "how do we seek the welfare of everyone involved?" We might explore questions like: why did Ms. Jones start the fight, and what tools might she need to de-escalate in the future? What was Ms. Jemison's role in whatever precipitated the fight? How might the community come together to help with mediation? What resources might one or both of them need to support them in living?

If we focused on these questions, justice would look very different in our country. Instead of sending someone who has lost a pregnancy, been shot, and who has a child depending on her to jail – irreversibly harming both this woman *and* her young daughter and increasing the likelihood that this incident will spark more crime in the months and years ahead – we might provide everyone involved with services that would actually *reduce* the likelihood of this violence spreading.

Which points us, perhaps, in the direction of *why* Na'ara might have done what she did. Because that's the question, right? *Why* did she seek the welfare of Naaman? Well, honestly, because it was also a matter of *her* welfare. First, if she successfully helped to heal this man, then there might be a response of gratitude from the family that *owns* her. That can only be good

for her. Second, if Naaman is healed, it might improve life in the household as stress goes down and happiness goes up. That's likely good for her too. And third, and most importantly, ensuring the security of this family ensures her own security – because if Naaman were to get worse and all of Isha's greatest fears were to come true, Na'ara would be the most vulnerable of all. She would truly be destitute, without hope of protection of any kind, possibly without any chance of life. Seeking the welfare of Naaman provides for her own welfare.

Seeking the welfare of others – reflecting how *God* approaches justice – is not just *for* them, it's for all of us. Try to imagine what our nation would look like if we asked, “What does this person need?” instead of “Are they getting what they deserve?” Of course, it's not always possible or reasonable for the *victim* to do this, but what if the rest of us did? What kind of country would we create? As we go out this week, I invite you to ignite your imagination and truly ponder this. And I challenge you to put that imagining into action in your own life. Because together we *can* change the way that we approach justice as a nation – it will take all of us, but we *can* create a system that truly reflects the love of God in Christ.

And if your imagination needs a bit of a jumpstart, I encourage you to listen to [this piece](#) from NPR.