

Reflection

Monday, Third Week of Lent

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*Today is the International Day for Women. It is a global day celebrating the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of **women**. ... Marked annually on March 8, International Women's Day (IWD) is an important day to celebrate women's achievements and raise awareness about women's equality.*

Awareness of this International Women's Day brings a sensitivity for a need to focus on a minor, yet significant person in today's Scriptures.

From the Second Book of Kings, we hear the story of Naaman, the army commander of the king of Aram in Syria, a quite successful man. However, Naaman was afflicted with a humiliating, incurable disease – leprosy. This disease would debilitate him, bring the loss of his limbs, eat his flesh, cast him away from society and slowly lead to his death.

A young Israeli girl had been abducted from her country and family in a raid and now was a servant of the wife of Naaman, the army commander. This servant girl reminds me of Bakhita, whose feast we celebrated last month, also abducted in a raid from Sudan and later became a servant who meaningfully touched the lives of many people.

We begin to understand that this young girl in Naaman's household was a person of faith, probably coming from a family who practiced their Hebrew faith and was familiar with the wise and gifted prophets of her people. Knowing the distress of her mistress regarding her husband's disease, this young slave-servant, in so many ways powerless, had enough confidence and "bold faith" to tell them about the prophet Elisha in Israel, described as a man of God, who could cure a person of leprosy. This young girl of faith was able to respond to the need before her. She had an inner freedom in spite of her slave status. She opened for Naaman a possibility of new life, of a cure for his dreaded disease. As so many women in our world, often treated as not worth much, whether highly educated or not, little appreciated, often overlooked or pushed aside and seen as powerless, just a servant. Yet they are people deserving respect and recognition of their value and human rights, let alone appreciation for their power to bring quality to people's lives.

Scriptures recount several stories of God choosing such women and give us a view of humble greatness, as this Israeli servant girl played a small, but significant part in the lives of others.

Naaman went to Israel, not because of *his faith*, but because of the faith of the Israeli servant and his own desperation. There, after meeting the king who felt threatened to the point of tearing his garments, Elisha presented himself to serve as the prophet and healer God had called him to be. However, with Elisha, Naaman found a new challenge. Offered a miraculous gift, Naaman thought the cure was too simple! Just to wash seven times in the Jordan and he would be cleansed. Unaware of the ways of God, he had his own idea of how the cure might happen, in a much more grand river in his own country.

Undoubtedly, many of us may have at times, questioned the ways of God. "Why did you call me to this place? Why is this happening? I don't understand." Why am I asked or told to do this....? In time, and with new wisdom, we see, the not so clear ways that God heals and leads

us to deeper life. It may be many years later before we recognize how God has transformed us, more deeply than could have been imagined.

It was Naaman's servant who helped him calm from his anger and indignation and accept the way of the "man of God." Naaman relented and obeyed. He was open. Once healed in body, Naaman's spirit was healed also. He, a foreigner, was able to acknowledge and give praise to the God of the Hebrews as the only God. He would not have come to this without the outreach of his wife's young Israeli servant-girl and Naaman's own wise servant.

In the Gospel, we see Jesus is in his own home of Nazareth, in the synagogue. The context of today's Scripture follows immediately after the treasured text of Jesus announcing that the *Spirit of the Lord is upon him. He has been anointed to bring good news to the poor, sent to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind.*

Jesus challenges his own people to believe. Yet, *they* think God cannot work in this way, through *someone they know so well*, someone they saw grow up before them.

Even though they, proclaiming the Jewish faith, had been given prophet after prophet, each Sabbath in the synagogue hearing proclamations of the prophets, they could not accept the ways of God, how God works. They thought they knew, and rejected Jesus before them, to the point of wanting to kill him. They wanted miracles, not because of their faith, but for show, for proof. Jesus, revealing the ways of God, heals out of deep compassion for the person suffering, not for show, not for proof. He was not going to perform miracles for them to believe. It was *metanoia* they needed, a change of heart. But they were not open.

This part of the story in the synagogue is a tragedy. Those who "belonged," closed their hearts and would not believe. Jesus was rejected. Yet, the Israeli servant girl of Naaman's household, even though she bore the terrible abduction, stolen from her family, her culture, her people, she could reach out in faith to announce that a man of God in Israel heals. This young woman shared in the mission of Jesus to announce the good news.

Perhaps on this International Women's Day, we could look back at our own life to see when we have experienced a woman of low stature, unrecognized for the gift she has been for others. Hold her and other women like her in our world today, before God asking for the transformation of our consciousness and for society and the church to recognize the dignity and rights of all women.