

**June 19, 2016  
2 Kings 5:1-14  
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### **“In Praise of Small Things”**

**Good morning! It is not only the Lord’s day, but this is also the day that many of us remember our earthly fathers, those who are alive and those who have already passed away. For some of us it’s an occasion to celebrate what we received from our fathers, for some of us perhaps a time to long for the things we did not receive. Whatever our personal circumstances, we can celebrate the fathers we’ve known who have embraced the sacred and joyful work of love and care for others. There are many ways to do this, and having children is just one of them. We honor all of you who have been intentional about your relationships, and have been a positive influence in someone’s life.**

**Our text today is from 2 Kings. This is an Old Testament reading, so I want to give you a bit more context for it. 2 Kings, as you might have guessed, comes right after 1 Kings. They were originally one single book, but scholars and translators in the middle ages thought it might be easier to divide it into two parts. It is, as you also might have guessed, a record of the kings of Israel , beginning with the death of king David in about 970 BCE. Book 1 ends with the death of king Ahab and the succession of his son, Ahaziah. 2 Kings begins with Ahaziah’s short reign, and ends with the destruction of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, and the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile in 586 BCE: a period of just over 400 years. These are landmark events for the people of Israel: the beginning of a unified kingdom until the defeat and dissolution of the monarchy -- kind of like tracing American government from the Revolutionary War to the secession of the South and the Civil War.**

**1 and 2 Kings is history, but it's pretty earthy history. It isn't a white-washed history: these kings aren't treated gently. There are a few good ones, like Josiah, but time after time, we're told that so-and-so did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. The Lord usually gets the upper hand in the end. It makes for some pretty lively reading -- especially if you can get past some of the names, like King Jehoshaphat (my spell check actually accepts that!), son of Asa.**

**Right along with the kings, we're introduced to some other characters: prophets. The prophet who figures prominently in 1 Kings is Elijah, who is right up there with Moses as one of the most revered prophets of Israel. Prophets were the voice of the Lord in Israeli politics, they had a habit of telling kings things that kings didn't want to hear. This meant that the kings and the prophets often had a tense relationship: maybe a little like Donald Trump and the Washington Post. Elijah was a tireless critic of King Ahab and his non-Jewish wife, Jezebel. Elijah railed against them, embarrassed their false prophets, and declared a multi-year drought which brought the country to its knees. Ahab and Jezebel tried to kill Elijah or starve him out, but to no avail. Ahab slept with his ancestors and Elijah, at the beginning of 2 Kings gets taken up into heaven without even having to die first: a rare mark of God's favor.**

**Before Elijah dies, he passes the mantle (literally, he passes his outer cloak -- that's where the expression "Passing the mantle" comes from) to his student and prophetic successor, Elisha. The similarity in the names can be a bit confusing, but the prophet of 2 Kings is Elisha. Elisha continues the tradition of annoying royalty and doing some pretty crazy stuff. In just the first 4 chapters of 2 Kings, Elisha parts the waters of the Jordan River, purifies water for an entire city, consults with the new king, performs a miracle to save a widow from starvation, raises a child from the dead, purifies a big pot of stew, and feeds 100 people with just a small offering of bread and grain. Elisha is one busy prophet. I want to tell you a specific story from 2 Kings 2:23-24, because it has particular meaning for the McFadden family -- Tim and his brothers and their father. Tim's dad had me letter these verses and he posted them in his office with a photo. I'm a bit baffled about the theology here, so I'll just read it to you, and leave it at that.**

Another time, Elisha was on his way to Bethel and some little kids came out from the town and taunted him, "What's up old baldy? Out of our way, baldhead!" Elisha turned, took one look at them and cursed them in the name of God. Two bears charged out of the underbrush and mauled them. Forty-two children in all."

So Elisha's fame as a prophet has spread throughout Israel, and even beyond. In our text today, Naaman, a great warrior from the neighboring country of Aram, has found out that despite his strength and skill, he is not invincible. He has leprosy: an infectious disease which effects the skin, nerves and mucus membranes. It caused nerve damage and eventually disfiguration and deformity. When people saw the telltale white patches of skin on your extremities, they avoided you like the plague -- because leprosy was the plague, and there was no cure for it at that time. Not only was Naaman's career as a warrior about to be cut short, he was going to spend the rest of his life living in a leper colony, begging from a distance to support himself. The king of Aram told his wife about the terrible thing that happened to Naaman, one of his best commanders. And the queen's servant girl, who had been captured from Israel, said, "If only Naaman were in my country! There's a prophet there who could cure him."

So the King of Aram writes a letter of recommendation and sends it, along with Naaman and a bunch of silver, gold, and garments to the King of Israel, saying "Cure this man!" And the King of Israel is in a tough spot, because he can't cure Naaman -- nobody can. But the king can't just send Naaman home without losing face and offending the King of Aram. Maybe the King of Aram is using this whole thing to pick a fight and start a war. What should he do? Aiyiyi. Elisha gets wind of this and says, "For heaven's sake, there's a prophet in Israel, tell him to come see me." So Naaman gathers all of his horses and chariots pulls up in front of Elisha's house. And a messenger comes out and says, "Go wash in the Jordan River seven times and you'll be healed." And Naaman is seriously displeased. He is a big important guy, he had a fancy letter from his king, he brought all the horses and chariots to the end of this crummy cul-de-sac in front of this non-descript house, and what-his-name the little bald guy isn't even going to *come out*? Are you kidding me? He's not going to call on the Lord and make a big show of this? I'm supposed to just turn

**the whole circus around and go wash in some lousy local river? I am outa here, and I'm never setting foot in this forsaken country again. And Naaman turns and stomps away.**

**But Naaman has a servant who has some sense, who follows after him and says, Hey, I know it's ridiculous and the Jordan River is not impressive, but what have you got to lose? If he'd told you to do something really difficult, you'd have done it in a heartbeat. Why not do something simple and see if it works? It can't hurt. So Naaman goes down to the Jordan River, washes seven times, and is healed. He is clean.**

**I think there's a lesson here for all of us -- not just fathers, but they're allowed to listen, too. Small things matter. Little acts of kindness, the small sacrifices which parents make on behalf of their families all the time. Heroic deeds are fine, but that isn't how it goes down for most of us. Big dramatic stuff happens occasionally, but rather than having the chance to drag an entire family to safety from a burning car, we do the small thing of making sure everyone's seatbelt is fastened. We hardly ever get to call down the word of the Lord and wave our hands and have the whole crowd gasp in amazement. If that's how Elisha had healed Naaman (and I'm sure it could have happened that way) it would have been mostly about Elisha, and not very much about God. Doing small things is an act of faith. Not so much faith in ourselves, and our ability to impress others, but faith in God, and God's power to use even small things to make a big difference.**

**There is so much in the world that we'd like to be different. The evil of a man who took the lives of 49 people in Orlando and wounded scores of others; the ongoing evil of ISIS in Syria and the Boko Haram in Nigeria. What? All we can do is pray? Buy a T-shirt? What's that going to do? I'll tell you, it's going to do more than if we don't pray. The trap of human heroics is that it makes a think if we can't make a big gesture and see immediate results, there's no point in doing anything at all. Maybe sending a T-shirt for a kid in Nigeria isn't going to change anyone's life -- but hey, it's a small thing that I can do, and it reminds me of how blessed I am to be able to do it. It reminds me that when we entrust the small things to God, we realize that all those**

**small things matter to God; every life matters to God. And that's huge.**