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Simply, Better  
Brantford United Churches  
July 31, 2022  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 2 Kings 5:1-14

I'm delighted to be sharing these summer services together. And just thrilled that Rev. Christine Hossack, the minister at Harmony UC and also a classmate at Emmanuel College is sharing the sermon time today.

It's hard to know exactly what to do with our story about Naaman. Can we relate to him? Can we relate to someone who is so powerful? Can we relate to someone who has servants and resources at his disposal to deal with as he wishes? Someone who is so well-connected? Someone who ... [pull out phone and pretend to have a call from Bill Gates]. But perhaps we can relate to Naaman a bit better if we think of him as "poor". Not poor in the sense of wealth of course. Not poor in the sense of his authority. But poor in the sense that some people are so poor that all they have is money. He just does not recognize a good opportunity when he sees one. He claims that he wants to be healed of his leprosy, but is then disappointed because he does not like the solution.

[image: cure pill]

Think of the last time any of us saw our doctor because of an important problem. And how delighted we would have been to hear that a simple solution - like a single pill - would solve our problems. We would love a "cure" like that. We don't want to hear complicated. We don't want to hear that we have to exercise, or change our diet, or modify our lifestyle or anything like that. I imagine we would all love to hear that we could solve our biggest problem by jumping into a river.

I've never been told to jump into a river, but many people have told me to go jump in a lake, but it just occurred to me now that that suggestion may not have been for my benefit.

Why was Naaman so upset to think that his problem had a simple solution? I imagine we each have our own answer to that question. Don't we like simple solutions?

[image: toothpaste chocolate]

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I'm reminded of a story - about toothpaste. Because toothpaste is more interesting than you think. For example, did you know that toothpaste comes in many flavours. You might have tried "Mint Chocolate Trek" from Crest. Or if you are more adventurous you might have tried

[image: pickle]

pickle flavour. And I want to hear from any of you if you have tried

[image: bacon]

bacon flavoured toothpaste. Because nothing says fresh more than synthetic bacon.

[image: toothpaste box]

Fortunately, our story is not about flavours. It is about packaging. As we know, toothpaste comes in tubes, but for shipping and storage, these tubes are put into rectangular cardboard boxes. And one toothpaste manufacturer had a problem because they would sometimes ship out boxes of toothpaste that contained empty boxes. That was not good for business.

So they hired an engineering firm to devise a system so that empty cardboard boxes would be detected and removed - not packaged up and shipped to customers. 6 months and \$8 million later, they had a solution. They placed a precision scale on the line. If a box passing the scale was too light, the line would stop, and a bell would sound. A worker would then remove the empty box and press a button to restart the line.

The results were amazing. Not a single box was ever shipped out of the factory empty after the solution was put into place. What a fantastic project. It was money well spent. When the system was first installed, it removed 10-15 empty boxes per day. After 3 weeks, the number of boxes dropped to 0. The line was no longer creating empty boxes. The problem that the scales were designed to fix had simply gone away.

Puzzled by this, the CEO toured the factory, and was interested to see the new scales at work. On the line a few feet before the new scale was a small \$20 desk fan. The fan was not part of the original project. The fan simply blew any empty boxes into a bin ahead of the scale. The CEO asked a worker where the fan had come from. The response was, "Oh - one of the guys put it there because he was tired of walking over every time the bell rang."

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So what is the better solution? An \$8 million scale or a \$20 fan? But remember that no one thought of the fan until after the scale was installed.

[image: keep it simple]

I've met a lot of people. And I have observed that many people do not like simple solutions to their problems. There are many different reasons of course, because we are all individuals. One common reason - surprisingly - is that sometimes, we do not want to solve our problems at all. When we hold on to problems for a long time, those problems can become part of our own identity. Part of our day-to-day living. Problems can actually become something we cling on to. And, some people just like to have things to complain about. Sometimes, we prefer problems to their solutions - even if the solutions are simple.

I've heard many people tell me that they do not like simple solutions because accepting a simple solution to a problem you have held on to for a long time suggests that you should have solved your problem a long time ago. The CEO in the toothpaste factory must have been kicking herself for not thinking of the fan solution first.

[image: symptom vs problem]

Sometimes, we don't solve problems very well because we confuse a symptom with a problem. That is any easy mistake to make. Many times, symptoms do appear to be problems. We seem to be wired by our own nature to obsess on symptoms instead of actually solving problems. It can be hard to even see the real problems.

[image: Chesterton quote]

G.K. Chesterton once wrote "It isn't that [we] can not see the solution. It is that [we] can not see the problem".

Does all this sound a bit over-stated? Perhaps it is. But I believe many of our own problems are over-stated too. Is life really that complicated? For example: If you are missing someone, call them up. If you want to meet with a friend, invite them. If you want to be understood better, explain yourself. If you want to know something, ask. If you think this church should start doing something, start doing it yourself and encourage others to join you. If you don't like something, tell someone who can make a difference. If you want something, ask for it. If you want to have a friend, be a friend. It is not that complicated.

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[image: keep it simple]

Are we - like Naaman - still looking for complicated “cures” to our problems? Are we waiting for a solution that fits our preconception of what the solution should look like? Are we willing to work with a simple solution? Are we holding back, waiting for a solution on our terms? Or are we willing to accept the healing and the gift of each other in this time and place. Are we willing to fully embrace the moment - this moment?

This moment, and this place, are already a gift from God. Perhaps that is all we need. If we embrace this moment, this place, and each other as gifts from God.

We have each other. Really, what else do we need?

Amen