
Simply, Better
Chapel in the Park United Church
July 27, 2025
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Based on 2 Kings 5:1-14

Summertime in church is always interesting. The lectionary (which is the list of suggested Bible readings each week) are very different in the summer. One difference is that the summer lectionary includes really long readings from the Old Testament. Like our reading today about Naaman. The authors of the lectionary seem to imagine that fewer people come to church during the summer. And that the people who do come are patient! The summer lectionary therefore includes many of the mythical stories that help create the overall biblical narrative. Today, we get the story about Naaman.

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 Donald Trump]. 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. And in particular, he does not like the solution to his leprosy because it is simple, easy, cheap, doable. What could be easier than jumping into a river?
[image: cure pill]

Think of the last time any of us saw a 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, right? 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 problems in life by just 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 was perhaps not for my personal benefit.

Anyway - why was Naaman so upset to think that his problem had a simple solution? Don't we like simple solutions?

I'm reminded of a story about toothpaste. And whether or not this story actually happened, it is a true story. Toothpaste is more interesting than you might think. For example, you know that toothpaste comes in many flavours.

[image: toothpaste chocolate]

You might have tried "Adventurous Mint Chocolate Trek" from Crest. Or if you are actually 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 like the taste of synthetic bacon, am I right?

[image: toothpaste box]

Fortunately for us, our story is not about flavours. It is about packaging. As we know, toothpaste usually comes in tubes. But for shipping and storage, these tubes are sometimes put into rectangular cardboard boxes so that they can be managed more easily. And one toothpaste manufacturer had a problem because they would sometimes ship out boxes of toothpaste that contained empty boxes. A carton of 144 boxes of toothpaste might contain 144 boxes but only 143 tubes of toothpaste. That was not good for business.

Clearly, this problem would impact on the image of the company. And therefore its sales. So the CEO of the toothpaste factory got the top people in the company together to solve the problem. They started a new project, and hired an external engineering company to solve the "empty box" problem, since their own engineering department was already too stretched to take on extra work.

Six months and \$8 million later, the company had a fantastic solution to the

problem - on time, on budget, high quality work. The solution involved using a precision scale that would weight the boxes as they came down the assembly line. If a box was lighter than it should be, the line would stop, a bell would sound and lights would flash. A worker would then walk over to the scale, remove the empty box, and press a button to restart the line. The solution - although expensive - was simple and effective.

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 empty 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 metre or so 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.”

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. We discussed this at length last week. But in brief summary, 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. Our problems can actually become something we cling on to. The idea of solving our deepest problems can leave us feeling exposed, vulnerable, or unsure who we’ll be without that problem in our lives.

I think that is a very common reaction, actually. And I want to leave you with a visual on this point. Let me first introduce the character.

Who here knows the cookie monster.

[image: cookie monster]

He's a fun character of course. And it is good - in a kids show - to have a character like the cookie monster that kids can relate to. But how do you think the cookie monster is feeling these days given the current health craze that says we should all eat better? I mean, cookies might be delicious, but they are not really very healthy. Cookies are actually a problem. But can you imagine the cookie monster without cookies.

[image: I'd just be a monster]

If the cookie monster did not have cookies, he would just be a monster. And that thought is not something that the cookie monster would want to entertain. Sometimes our own self-destructive behaviour in part gives us our identity, and it is not a simple matter to just let go.

[image: Better the devil you know]

Another issue is that - to be blunt - sometimes, we prefer problems to their solutions. Problems are known, solutions are unknown. Like that old phrase, "Better the devil you know."

And of course, some people just like to have things to complain about. So why on earth would you want to fix something that you enjoy complaining about?

But why do we avoid embracing simple solutions? Let's start by recognizing that sometimes, we do not accept simple solutions because they are actually too simple. Sometimes problems are more complex than the proposed solutions. And that should make us wary. I know, the title of this reflection is "Simply, Better", but simple is not always right, of course.

As one example, think of the politicians who today blame our current housing crises on immigrants. That is so simplistic that it is wrong. The housing crisis is partly because demand exceeds supply of course. But a much larger factor is corporate greed and corruption. The crisis is caused by the fact that we do not recognize housing as a basic human right and take steps to make that a reality. Simple solutions - like blaming immigrants - are sometimes wrong.

One example is happening in our church actually. As you may know, we recently installed push-button door openers on our front door and the upstairs washroom. Think

about the washroom door. It's very simple really. You push a button to open the door. You walk in. After the door closes again you push a button to lock it. What could be simpler. That's what I thought anyway. Until the day I was in the washroom with the "locked" light glowing red ... and someone walked in on me!

This will be fixed tomorrow, but it was a bit of a shock to me. How can something as simple as a washroom door be complicated?

[image: keep it simple]

But in spite of that I think it is common that simple solutions often do work - and we avoid them. Why is that? So here's is my list of reasons we do not like simple solutions. And I would love to hear what you think later.

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. In other words, you failed. When a simple solution to a problem works, it's very natural for us to feel as if we have failed by not finding the solution sooner. That's ridiculous actually, but it is a natural reaction. The CEO in the toothpaste factory must have been kicking herself for not thinking of a \$20 fan before embarking on their \$8M scale project.

[image: symptom vs problem]

Sometimes, we don't like simple solutions 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".

Another reason we may not like simple solutions is that they somehow offend our sense of self-importance. Naaman expected something dramatic, probably because of his power and position. A simple solution can feel like a personal diminishment - as if the solution should be as grand as we think we ourselves are. Accepting something ordinary can feel humiliating to the ego. I'm sure that when Naaman heard he should jump into the

river his very first thought was ... anyone could do that? What about me? I am too special to just jump into a river.

[image: keep it simple]

Another reason is that when we hear complicated, we feel like we are in control. We can become a technical expert by mastering specific steps. If we learn a complicated process, we might even be able to make money off it later. A simple solution feels like giving up control to something too basic, maybe even too common. But complexity gives the illusion that we're doing something important.

Another reason we avoid simple solutions is that we confuse healing with deserving. Naaman brings gold and garments, expecting to buy his healing. Sometimes we avoid simple solutions because we want to earn our fix. A free gift - like grace - might offend our sense of meritocracy. Perhaps we'd rather pay for something we can brag about instead of receiving something for free.

Sometimes we avoid simple solutions because we don't trust the source. Naaman nearly walked away because Elisha did not come out to meet him personally. Sometimes we reject good advice because it comes from a source we don't respect - or who doesn't match our expectations in some way.

Does all this sound a bit over-stated? Perhaps it is. But I believe many of our own problems are over-stated too. Life can be complicated. But often - it is not. 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. Life is not always complicated.

You might be wondering why we are discussing "problems" at all. We don't have any problems do we? Well, sure we do. Most of us here are adults - and all adults have problems. We all carry emotional baggage that we at least consider putting down. We all know people and situation where we could lean a little deeper into compassion and love. We all carry regrets that are opportunities for forgiveness.

And sometimes, simple solutions come into our minds. And we get to decide what to do. Do we take the solution and work with it? Or do we resist?

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 waiting for a solution on our own terms? Are we - like Naaman - still waiting for healing to come in a certain shape? Are we holding out for something dramatic, something grand, something worthy of our status or our wounds?

Or are we open to the possibility that God’s grace has already arrived - simple, unexpected, and right in front of us? Healing does not always come in a flash. It often comes quietly. Through a kind word. A small action. A conversation. A community. A moment of rest. Perhaps even, a river.

And the good news - the gospel news - is this: You do not have to earn healing. You do not have to deserve grace. You do not even have to understand it. You just have to be willing to receive it.

So take the step into the river. Make the phone call. Ask the question. Accept the hug. Say the prayer. Not because it’s grand. But because it’s simple. And maybe - simply - better.

Amen.