



# THE CHEAP CURE

*2 Kings 5:1-15*

A Sermon for Independence Day by Barbara Brown Taylor

BCUMC/CCUMC  
Pastor Brad

“The Cheap Cure” by Barbara Brown Taylor<sup>1</sup>

*“Barbara Brown Taylor is an American Episcopal priest, professor, author and theologian and is one of the United States' best known preachers. In 2014, the TIME magazine placed her in its annual TIME 100 list of most influential people in the world.” -- Wikipedia*

I have never spent the 4<sup>th</sup> of July in NYC before but after watching the fireworks over the east river on TV last night, I think there must be no better place to be. (I might just have to bite the bullet and go fight the crowds for that, one day!)

While I watched I couldn't help think about the Statue of Liberty out there, and Ellis Island, and the hovering spirits of so many immigrants whose children and grandchildren have turned this little spit of land into a hologram of the world.

“Sweet Land of Liberty” (we sang.) That's what all the fireworks are about – and the parades. We call it Independence Day but sometimes I wish we could call it freedom day so we could spend a little more time wondering what that word means.

What are we free from? What are we free for? How do I know I am really free? Is my sweet liberty strictly a political thing –my freedom to speak, my freedom to vote – or is it a larger concept, one that includes having enough money to do what I want to do, or be able to choose how I will spend my time?

One of the most peculiar things about America, it seems to me, is that we have so much freedom and are still so unwell. As a nation we are strong, but we're not particularly healthy. Our families, our schools, our cities, and are political systems are all showing signs of disease. Beefed up on steroids of wealth and power, we look pretty darn good from the outside, but the truth is that inside we are feeling a little shaky.

A few minutes ago we heard the story of Naaman the Syrian. His main claim to fame is that Jesus mentioned him in a sermon once (Luke 4:27). His story is found in the book of Kings, which is just what it sounds like – a history of the Kings of Israel, from David to Zedekiah. Naaman shows up about halfway through, in the ninth century before Christ, when Jehoam was king of Israel. Although Israel and her neighbor, Aram (which we now know as Syria) were frequently at war, they were momentarily at peace.

Aram had the better army, however, and Israel knew it. Israel even knew the name of the commander of the Aramean army, since he had beaten up on them more than once. His name was Naaman, which means ‘pleasant’ – an unlikely name for warrior, perhaps –

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Home by Another Way*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1999.

but even his enemies admitted that Naaman was a great man, whom God had favored in battle.

Think Colin Powell, only with one important difference: Namaan didn't photograph well. He had leprosy, which was not as big a problem for a Syrian as it might have been for a Jew, but which ate away at Namaan in more ways than one.

He was a national hero for goodness' sake! He had an office with a view at the Aramean Pentagon. He hobnobbed with heads of state! But there was always that awkward moment when he met people for the first time. Some handled their surprise well, but others stared at him or looked quickly away.

He had learned the hard way about shaking hands. He found it was better to offer a slight bow with both hands clasped behind his back. That way he didn't have to watch the other person decide whether or not to be brave when he held out his scabby hand. He was so tired of seeing the questions register on their faces. "Good Lord, is that contagious? Poor guy. It must be awful to have to deal with that. Why doesn't he just stay home and spare himself the grief?"

But their questions were nothing compared to his own. If God favored him, then why was he sick? And why couldn't anyone in Aram make him well?

Namaan's help came from a source he never expected – a young Jewish girl who had been taken captive during one of his military raids on Israel. She was the least of the least in Aram – a child, a slave, a Jew, and a girl. The book of Kings doesn't even give her a name, but she was the one who led Naaman to his cure.

She didn't speak directly to him – he was much too scary for that – but she spoke to Naaman's wife, whom she served. "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria," she said to her mistress one day. "He would cure him of his leprosy!"

It was a preposterous suggestion. When the king's own physicians had failed to do Naaman any good, he was supposed to go hunting for a faith healer in Israel based on the advice of a pre-adolescent servant girl?

It was preposterous – but Naaman jumped at the opportunity. If you or a loved one have ever been that sick, then you understand. Because, once you run out of respectable doctors, having done everything they said – once you've taken the pills, and applied the poultices, and practiced 20 minutes of positive visualization every day, and nothing has changed – well, if someone tells you about a clinic in Mexico where a doctor with a veterinary degree has discovered a substance that works wonders on humans, there's a good chance you'll get in your car and go there.

It may sound preposterous, but if you really, really want to get well...then you can't afford to leave any stone unturned – even if that stone turns out to be some “holy man” in Israel.

As soon as Naaman's wife told him what the servant girl had said, he went to the king of Aram, who was happy to oblige his star general. “Go then,” the king said to him, “and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel.”

Naaman took the letter and hurried home to pack. Since he had no idea what a cure for leprosy might cost in Israel, he emptied his bank account; loading up his camels with 750 pounds of silver and 150 pounds of gold, plus ten sets of fine clothes. Then he kissed his wife goodbye and set off for Israel, where he presented his letter to the king.

“When this letter reaches you,” it said, “know that I have sent you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy.” It was a nice gesture, however misguided. The problem was that Naaman's boss, the king of Aram, didn't understand real power. He thought the king of Israel was the man to see – that if there was a cure available in Israel then the king would surely know about it.

Only the king didn't know about it, because the only kinds of power he had were political power and military power. He didn't know one thing about healing power – redeeming power, the power of God – which was why he got so upset when he read the letter.

The first thing he did, before he told anyone what it said, was to grab the front of his royal robe and tear it right down the middle. “Am I God, to give death or life” – he howled out loud, “that this man sends word to me to cure a man of leprosy?” it sounded just like a trap. The king of Aram had asked him to do something he could not do so that Aram would have an excuse to declare war on Israel. It was all politics -- politics was all he knew.

Word of the king's distress got around town pretty quickly. When Elisha – the prophet whom the little Jewish serving girl knew about, even though the king of her country didn't - -when Elisha heard about it, he sent a message to the king. “Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.

That may not have been a strange message at the time, but it sounds pretty strange now. Who goes to a prophet for a cure? For a prediction, maybe; or a hair-raising sermon on the righteousness of God, but for help with a skin disease? That's just weird. But as I said, if you really, really want to get well...

So Naaman got directions to Elisha's house and off he went. Then he lined up all his horses and chariots in the front yard and waited. What was the protocol exactly? Should he

approach Elisha or let Elisha approach him? Was he supposed to kneel or something? He hoped not! Kneeling was totally out of the question. He was a general, you know.

He would offer a slight bow, both hands clasped behind his back. "Good sir," he would say. "I am General Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram." That should set the proper tone.

Then he could soften up a little. "I have heard so much about you. I come with high hopes, and quite a lot of money. I am prepared to pay anything you ask for your services."

While Naaman was still rehearsing, the door of Elisha's house opened and a messenger came out. "Go wash in the Jordan seven times," he said to Naaman, "your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean."

Naaman was so surprised that he hardly heard the man. What kind of shabby welcome was this? Where was Elisha, the man of God? At the very least, he owed his visitor a seat in the shade and a cup of cool water. Couldn't he even come out of the house and say hello?

Naaman was furious! He had fully expected Elisha to come out to him – there in the yard – to say some grand words, to make some grand gesture, so that he would be cured in a spectacle that no one watching would ever forget.

Instead, he was being sent away – by a messenger, no less! – to go splash around in that shallow muddy Jordan River like a 5-year old boy. He -- General Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, with 900 pounds of gold and silver in his luggage!

It was too much. It was just too, too much. "Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?" he spat out. "Could I not wash in them and be clean?" he raged, and stomped away.

His servants must've known Naaman pretty well – well enough to know that he was more hurt than mad – because they tiptoed up to him and convinced him to give it a try.

"If he had given you something hard to do, you would have done it, right?" they reasoned with him. "So he gave you something simple. So?"

That was the beginning of Naaman's cure. He was completely emptied out. His royal connections had gotten him nowhere. His reputation had gotten him nowhere. His bags of money had gotten him nowhere.

Elisha wouldn't even come out of his house to meet him, and now he had been given this supremely stupid thing to do – to strip down in front of all his men and take the world's longest bath in a muddy river that barely came up to his knees.

But, he did it. Because he really, really wanted to get well, he did it. He left his clothes and shoes on the bank. He picked his way through the rocks to the deepest part of the river, where the current bumped against his body like soft pillows. The water was sort of green and smelled of fish. There was nothing remotely sacred about it.

Naaman found a place to kneel and sank down for the first time. It was cold under the water but not on top of it. He didn't dare look at his skin.

Seven times he made the plunge from cold to hot, from river to sun. Each time he rose he sucked air like a newborn. Then he went down again with his eyes wide open so that the sky wrinkled and turned green as the water. He tried not to think of anything but the numbers.

Five... six.... By the seventh time, he was winded. He was also very clean. When he looked down at his skin, he saw the flesh of a 5-year old. It was smooth. It was fresh. He was well.

Later on he tried to pay Elisha, but Elisha wouldn't hear of it. "Your money's no good here," he told Naaman. "God works for free!" So it was a cheap cure. All Naaman had to do was follow directions. All he had to do was empty himself out, abandoning the pretense that who he was, or what he was worth, could get him what he needed. All he had to do was strip himself down until his hurt flesh was exposed for everyone to see, and go play in the river like a little boy.

Then God did for him what military victories and kings and bags of money could never do. God restored his flesh – God created him all over again, and Naaman was made new.

I could explain this story to death, but I don't think I will. You may never hear it again on a 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend, but maybe the next time you're saying your prayers for the great shaky nation of ours, you'll remember that great leprous man Naaman, whose wealth and power turned out to be useless to him in his search for health, and who was ready to trade it all in when God surprised him with a cheap cure that made him truly free.

Amen.