

The San Francisco Swedenborgian Church  
July 8, 2001 Communion Worship Service

## Making the Connection

Transcript of the sermon by Rev. Dr. Rachel Rivers

Scripture References: Luke 4:24-27 and 2 Kings 5:1-14

### *Concluding Prayer for Communion Service*

*O Lord Jesus Christ, by whose mercy we have been fed with heavenly gifts: Abide with us, O Lord, and fill us with your peace. Direct us in our way; uphold our going in our paths. Give us grace so to keep your commandments henceforth, that we may abide in your love forever. Amen.*

To be fed with *heavenly* gifts. That is our Lord's invitation to each one of us. Not only the communion meal that we have just partaken, but with all meals, with all food, with all drink, with all encounters, with each breath we take, to be fed with heavenly gifts.

Let's think back for a moment to our Hebrew scripture reading, the story of Naaman the Syrian. You remember he's a mighty warrior and very successful. And yet he has leprosy and is in need of healing. And it is a slave, a servant girl, who tells his wife where he can go for help; and amazingly he listens to the servant girl and his wife and follows their good advice. And off he goes with a letter of introduction to the King of Israel.

The King sees him, reads the letter, and tears at his clothes, which is what people did back then when they were really upset. He felt that what was being asked of him was an impossibility. He said, "Am I a god to give life or death?" What was being asked of the King was something that the King was not capable of doing. And the King was not used to being asked things that he wasn't capable of doing.

But his prophet, Elisha, comes to the rescue. And Naaman goes to him expecting to be treated with some great courtesy and respect given his high station and position, but Elisha doesn't even come out to say hi! Elisha sent out a messenger who says, "If you want to be made whole, if you want to be made well, if you want to be cleansed, then this is what you are to do. Go dip yourself in the Jordan River seven times."

So Naaman hears this and goes away, shaking his head in a rage. First of all, he has felt terribly insulted that Elisha didn't at least come out himself and give him this message. And he's also insulted that he has to go dunk himself in some Jordan River of Israel when wouldn't one of the rivers in his hometown, Damascus, have done just as well?

It's great that the servants in this story come to the rescue, because Naaman would have just left in a huff, his pride getting the better of him. But his servants say, "Hey master, hey father, calm

down. Is this really so much that's being asked of you? If something courageous and difficult had been asked of you, wouldn't you have done that? Could you just do this simple thing?"

And so he does. He dips himself in the Jordan River seven times and comes out whole and clean. He comes out *whole* and *clean*. He comes out *fed with heavenly gifts*.

Okay, let's look at what we call the internal meaning, the spiritual sense of this story. Naaman is that part of ourselves that functions pretty darn well in this external world. He gets up in the morning, does what he has to, wins the day, and goes to bed at night, gets up the next day and does it again. He's got it pretty well together; he's quite functional. But something's missing. Leprosy is a disease that, among other things, causes no feeling in part of your body; it makes you numb.

So think about that, being numb, being without feeling, being *deadened* in certain places in your life. This is what the leprosy represents. It means being disconnected from what you know you should be feeling but that you're not feeling. It means going through the motions. Everything looks okay on the outside, but you're just going through the motions. There's a way that meaning and purpose and peace and true fulfillment are missing. This is the part of ourselves to which this story speaks, the part of ourselves that's doing all the right things but somehow is missing the heavenly gifts.

Let's talk about the Jordan River. There are two main rivers in the Bible story that have to get crossed in order for significant journeys to happen. The first one is what the Israelis have to cross when they leave Egypt with Moses. It is the Red Sea. Now that crossing symbolizes leaving the mental state of being held captive by our self-destructive inclinations, getting free of that kind of bondage. Then the people spend 40 years traveling around here and there in circles in the wilderness and then they reach another body of water which separates them from the Promised Land. It's the Jordan River, the same body of water that Elisha tells Naaman that he needs to immerse himself.

Now this crossing represents, in the spiritual language of the Bible, what are called *introductory truths*: simple and basic rules and truths for living; and if we follow them, they will lead us into the Promised Land. They are the simple and basic truths of life; if we live by them day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year, we will find our life full of meaning and purpose and peace and joy.

Now another name for these basic truths and simple rules is the Ten Commandments. The crux of the Ten Commandments is that we love God with all our heart and that we love our neighbor as our self. So this is the essence of the most basic and fundamental truths, that if we were able to live by this, we would leave the wilderness of emptiness, boredom, and going through the motions. We would leave that world behind and we would step into the world called the Promised Land where life itself—the most simple and basic encounters and steps and moments—are ones in which we receive heavenly joy. They are moments that are full of intimacy.

So this is the River to which Naaman is sent and he needs to dip himself seven times. He needs to come back to the fundamentals and the basics and the simple truths and that's why it's the servants that he needs to listen to, those parts of us that are there to serve us in the most basic and fundamental and good ways. Naaman is able to listen to that, and he's able to set aside his pride, and he's able to humble himself and remember the significance of those basic truths.

What does it really mean to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself? One of the ways to look at that that I find helpful is to look at its opposite, to look at what it doesn't mean. There are three things here: loving God, loving neighbor, loving self.

When we're not loving God—another name for God by the way is *life*—when we're not loving life, loving neighbor, loving self, when we're actually kind of fed up with it all, that's not being loving. When we think that life ain't so great, that's not loving God. When we tend to think that so-and-so isn't so great, that's when we're getting away from the basic truths. And what's the third one? Good old self. When we're thinking that our self ain't so great and when we're thinking badly of ourselves, then we aren't following these simple, basic truths.

Now think to yourself, which of those three are you most likely to trespass? Is it life itself that you're most likely to curse or is it somebody else in your life, known or unknown that you're likely to curse and blame? Or is it yourself? Now, we all do all three, but some of us are more prone to do more of one than the other.

If we are to get cleansed of our leprosy, if we are to get cleansed of the places where we've gone dead inside, it can be helpful to just look at one way that we trespass one of those fundamental truths that we don't live up to. And there are thousands and millions of ways. But I'm going to say just one, and it's one that I can particularly relate to these days, and it is *unrealistic expectations*.

When we have unrealistic expectations, that is one way of not loving life, not loving others, and not loving our self. I have had, I will confess to you all, unrealistic expectations in lots of ways in my life, but the one that I'm going to confess to you has to do with this church. I've had unrealistic expectations about how it would be to carry on without my co-pastor. Like Naaman, the coping, functional part of myself has been doing a very good job of taking care of all the things that need to be taken care of. I can say, immodestly, that I have been successful in carrying on the tasks that are my responsibility. But also like Naaman, there have been ways that I have been ignoring some fundamental truths. I have been expecting that I will just carry on. And again, while that's working in the outer world, I have been ignoring, to some degree, what's involved in saying goodbye to somebody that we care about a lot.

I've been expecting also that I would not only carry on for myself, but that somehow I would be doing Jim's job as well—that I would be for you all, both myself and Jim. And I actually tried that, unconsciously, in my last sermon two weeks ago. And I came away *very* disappointed in

myself. And it took me a few days to realize why. And it was because I was expecting of myself unrealistically, that I would somehow be both Jim and me for you all.

So I have dipped myself in the Jordan River and realize that I'm not capable of that and that it is an unrealistic expectation. And I have become more loving and considerate of myself over the last couple of weeks, lowering that expectation and knowing and trusting that who I am is enough. Just as each of who you are is enough. When we can remember that we are, indeed, enough, fundamentally, then we are having a more realistic expectation of who we are and what we can do.

In terms of the commandments, to love life, to love one another and to love ourselves, we can have a more realistic expectation of what is being asked of us. What is being asked of us is not perfection. What is being asked of us is not that we be somebody else or that we be two people at once. It's being asked of ourselves that we be our self, that we humble ourselves and remember the simple and fundamental truths of life, that we encourage ourselves to love life even when it's tough, that we encourage ourselves to see the good in others even when it's hidden under lots and lots of stuff, and that we see and love and care for ourselves even when we're not able to do everything in any given day that we expect.

That Jordan River is always waiting for us; it's always there for us to dip ourselves, always there to immerse ourselves into. We can forget this most fundamental commandment a thousand times and still that river will be there waiting for us. We can never do anything that will make that river not available to us.

Amen.