

Knox Uniting Church Cluster
Sunday July 6th 2025 – (RCL: Pentecost +4, Prop9, Ord14 - Year C)
Sermon (reflection) by Russell Croxford at Boronia Road Uniting Church
Bible passages: 2 Kings 5:1-14; Luke 10:1-9

‘The power of simplicity’

[Title slide – older lady exchanging a flower with a little girl]

Have you ever been given a simple gift which you thought at the time did not have much value, yet you later realise just how valuable that gift ended up being for you? In other words, have you ever under-estimated a gift? Many years ago, a ministry colleague gave me a back scratcher. Just the simple, inexpensive type you can get at the two-dollar shop. At the time I never imagined how much I would end up appreciating that simple gift. But over many years of successfully relieving itches in those hard to get to places, I have grown to greatly value that simple gift!

Sometimes in life we underestimate the value of the small things. Perhaps the biggest lesson we ever learn in God’s Kingdom is that of the ‘great reversal’ of values, whereby the small, the simple, the weak, the forgotten, the ordinary, become the extraordinary and the greatest. The last shall be first. Time and time again, the bible turns normal value systems upside-down.

Today we have two stories that turn value systems upside-down.

Our first story comes from 2 Kings in the Old Testament and it’s the story of Naaman. Naaman was a very successful army commander, working for the King of Aram, a country just to the north of Israel. He was wealthy, powerful, and highly regarded. His only problem, it would seem, was that he had a severe skin disease (called leprosy in some translations). He was desperate for a cure and was prepared to use his wealth and influence to find that healing.

Naaman’s wife tells him one day that her young servant girl, an Israelite captured and made a slave by Naaman’s own people, was concerned for Naaman’s problem and wanted him to go to the prophet Elisha in her home country, for healing. Naaman was desperate enough, so he heads off in his grand chariot, with bundles of money, confident he would be able to ‘buy’ his way to a cure.

He arrived in Israel and goes straight to the king, but the king obviously cannot heal him. Eventually, Elisha himself hears about Naaman and summons him to his home, but when Naaman arrives in all his pomp and ceremony, Elisha doesn’t even pay him the respect of going out to meet him. He just sends his servant out with a message to Naaman telling him to go and wash himself seven times in the Jordan to be cleansed from the disease.

Naaman, with all his self-importance, is furious that he’s been snubbed by the prophet and is disgusted at the thought of washing in a foreign river, when in his view the rivers back home in Aram were much more respectable than the mere Jordan. This was all too far below him. So he leaves the house in a rage.

Strangely enough, it is his own servants who end up convincing him to follow Elisha's advice and wash seven times in the Jordan. He figures he has nothing to lose. He swallows his pride and washes in the Jordan – probably not expecting anything to happen. On the 7th wash he is healed completely, and his life is transformed as a result.

There are so many things this story teaches us. We could talk about cross-cultural issues, social boundaries and taboos, the dangers of wealth and self-importance. But I'd like to focus on the 'power of simplicity' in the story. Naaman's healing is not the result of great power or wealth. His healing comes through very humble channels.

[show slide of small boy giving a coffee to a homeless man]

This is a powerful image because someone is being helped by a 'mere' child. Did you notice in our story today who the true helpers were in Naaman's situation? Firstly, it was the young slave girl in Naaman's household whose care initiated the healing. Secondly it was Elisha's servants, not Elisha himself who relayed the message of healing to Naaman. Thirdly, it was Naaman's own servants who cared enough to convince him to get over his pride and wash in the humble Jordan. It was ordinary, un-named people doing something very simple, which led to the healing. Power didn't rest in money and prestige. It rested in the hands of the poorest and most humble of people, regarded as insignificant in society.

[show slide of Gandalf from Lord of the Rings and his quote]

The great Gandalf from 'Lord of the Rings', in his wisdom, once said, "Some believe it is only great power that can hold evil in check. But that is not what I have found. I have found that it is the small, everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay. Small acts of kindness and love". Whether that darkness that people experience comes in the form of oppression, conflict, poverty, or illness as in Naaman's case, the power of small acts of kindness and love – often from unexpected places, should never be underestimated.

[back to picture of older lady and young child]

Naaman had clearly underestimated how God could use the ordinary to achieve the extraordinary. He never expected what happened and the way it happened.

We pick up this same theme in our New Testament story as well, from Luke 10. In this story Jesus sends 72 people out, in pairs, ahead of him who will come later, on a mission to proclaim the good news to all the local towns and villages. Some translations make it 70 people, but we won't get caught up in that debate! That's a big group, much bigger than just the 12 closest disciples, with a big task, and quite a scary, daunting task given the potential opposition and rejection, and given that they were 'cold calling' on many households!

You would think this task would require much preparation, training and funding. But what stands out in this story is the instruction from Jesus to "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals" (v4). They are to go 'just as they are'. No impressive equipment. No slick presentations. No fancy gimmicks. No campaign costs at all. Just simple, ordinary people – unskilled, vulnerable and dependent. Hands empty but hearts full and ready to show love. That's it.

In Naaman's story he apparently underestimated the power of the simple acts of kindness towards him. He underestimated what he would *receive* through humble channels. In the gospel story, the 72 missionaries could well have underestimated what they could *give*

through very humble channels. If it was me, I reckon I'd be doing a lot of underestimating if I had no wallet, no bag and no sandals. (well, sandals I can do without. Let's replace sandals with a mobile phone. No mobile phone allowed!). What then could I offer?

Jesus tells them what they offer, and it's very simple. Two things. Firstly, just say "Peace to this house" (v5). That's the Jewish 'shalom' that wishes wellbeing and restoration upon that household. That shalom was one of the things they most needed to hear, especially in the times of the brutal Roman occupation. It's a shalom our world so desperately still needs us to bring to people today.

The second thing they are to offer, according to Jesus, is the simple statement "The Kingdom of God has come near to you" (v9). That's the good news of the gospel right there. God's Kingdom is within your reach – within everyone's reach.

It is interesting that both those simple greetings are offered regardless of whether the bearers of those greetings are received well or are rejected in that house or town. It's not up to them – or to us for that matter, to decide if our approach to people should be based on how we might be received. We are sent with a simple task of offering peace and a message of God's Kingdom, regardless.

Can I put this question to you. How would you bring those two greetings to someone in need today? If you are, in some way, involved in helping someone who is struggling in life, how would you put into your own words 'Peace be on this house?'. Or is there another way, not even using words at all that would communicate 'peace' to that person? Similarly, how would you put into your own words, or actions the statement, 'The Kingdom of God has come near to you'? We don't need to literally use those exact words. I'm sure there is an infinite variety of simple ways to say or do things that bring some life and healing to others.

I'm sure you would all agree that the small things do matter. It's a message we even hear in the secular world all the time. But our two stories today go deeper than that. It's not just the power of the small things. It's the power of what *God can do* through the small things. That's the faith dimension that these stories challenge us with. Believing what God can do in the ordinary.

It's like the story of the feeding of the 5,000, in John 6:1-15. It's my favourite New Testament story! It's not just a feel-good story about one young boy bringing his one small lunch along as a goodwill gesture. It's a story about never underestimating what God can do with the simple and ordinary things.

Before we finish, I'd like to make a comment about this photo. [referring to older lady and young child with the flower]. I love this picture. I don't know who is doing the giving or the receiving here, but there is a lot of joy being experienced by both of them. It's only one humble flower. The simplest of gifts. But it seems that these two are not underestimating the joy in the giving or the receiving of this simple gift.

I finish with this quote from John Van der Laar: "The way God's saving work comes into being is often through small, ordinary people and actions...It is important that the work of celebrities and high profile leaders in the struggle for justice is recognised and celebrated, but justice is not really achieved by these few. Justice is the result of millions of small acts by millions of ordinary people". (John Van der Laar – Sacredise).