

Unexpected Gestures

Homily

II Kings 5:1-14 and Mark 1:40-45

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This sermon was delivered as part of the interview process with Louisville Seminary.

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

I am so glad to be here this morning and I feel blessed and honored that I can share these two days with you. Thank you all for this opportunity.

I believe that one of the greatest joys of our lives as Christians, is when God comes to us unexpectedly, out of the blue, when we are not hoping nor imagining, when we can't read the signs on the horizon, when we are left completely unnoticed of God's movement and our unattended faith is not clever, firm or strong enough to perceive some of God's gestures, touches and movements towards us.

These two texts talk about God's unexpected movements toward the lives of two people, touching, healing and bringing them joy. We see God's glory manifesting itself in their lives as a surprising gesture that turn their lives around.

The passage in Second Kings tells us a story of the healing of a man who had leprosy and how by the unexpected gestures of his servants, he was completely transformed by God's power. The power of God in his life can be measured in the text by his words: "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel."

In the same way, the passage in the gospel of St Mark tells us about a man, a nameless man, who also had leprosy and was healed by Jesus. All of sudden, Jesus appears to this man and transforms his life. His overwhelming joy can be measured in these words: "But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word..."

This morning, we will focus on the story of Naaman. In this story, we see this powerful man who is the commander of the army of the King of Aram. This powerful position entails respect and honor. However, he suffers from a terrible and incurable illness, leprosy. There is no way out for him until a nameless servant let him know that there is a prophet in a foreign land called Israel that can heal him. His situation is so bad that he goes to the king of Israel in order to find the proper cure for his disease. When he gets to the king, the king says that he has no idea how to provide him with any healing. The king gets desperate and for a sure reason! What could happen to him and his people if he upsets the powerful nation of the surrounding areas?

Naaman is then sent to Elisha's home, the prophet of Israel. When he gets there, the prophet does not even go outside of his house to greet him. The prophet sends Naaman a message describing what he has to do to get healed and sends him away. Insulted, even

outraged, Naaman wants to leave Israel, condemns the prophet's behavior and diminishes the rivers of Israel. Not knowing what was in store for him, he plans to leave and go back home. Enough of foreign lands, of strange people!

It takes Naaman's nameless servants again to help him change his mind and take him to the rivers of Israel. He agrees and finally immerses himself seven times in this unknown river. Then, and only then, after having to go beyond so many difficulties, after having to gesture so many undesired movements, even movements without faith, he sees himself cleaned. That repetitive gesture brings him healing and creates in his heart a confession that he had never thought he would do, a kind of a mini-credo that glorifies a God he had never known before.

God's unexpected movements of grace come upon this man with so much power that he praises God with the highest exaltation he could ever give: "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel".

However, in order to be healed and be able to profess such praise, this man had to practice some movements within his mind, heart, body and soul that he might have never done before or at least might have not been used to. First, he has to leave his place and ask for help instead of having everybody at his feet asking for his favors. Then, he has to travel and go to another country and there he learns that his business is not with the king but with a man he has never heard of before. To make things worst, this foreigner man, a total stranger to Naaman, does not even bother to go out of his house to greet him. He gives him these funny instructions to immerse himself seven times in the waters of a small river he has never seen before. Can you imagine how his mind might have been at this point? Everything goes against his will, his ways of relating, practicing life and realizing life. In order to get healed, he has to let go much of his pride and even understanding in general. Should he comply with such shameful situation?

While he is wondering about all that is happening to him, he does not know that God is already waiting for him in the waters of Jordan. Before he leaves Israel, he is again convinced by his servants to go to the river and he finally get into the water. Then, swimming in the rivers of Jordan, he receives his healing. Only then, after having lost all his bearings, all his safety and power, when he is totally off of his safe place, off of his glory and power that God's grace shines upon him with healing and joy. And what a joy! A joy that required extenuated movements of expansion in order to be blessed. He was surprised. Surprised by the other, by the words of command of an unknown prophet, surprised by the rivers of another land and by a foreigner, he finally finds God's glory. He could never imagine that so many unexpected gestures would take him to this place of healing and joy.

Thinking about Naaman I wonder what are the things that we do or don't do that prevent God's visitation in our lives? The things that block the channels of God's grace coming to us, our communities and our world. How our thoughts, words, gestures and the way we produce our theologies and liturgies might keep us from experiencing God's surprising gifts? What might be the things that prevent God's grace out of our lives and interrupts

God's presence in our midst? How do we know when God is gesturing to us, smiling at us, or visiting us unexpectedly?

At first, Naaman didn't want to deal with the prophet, a stranger for him. Then he didn't want to deal with the proposed gestures and proceedings given by the prophet, who seemed not to respect him. Finally, he didn't want to immerse himself in the poor rivers of this foreign land. I can understand Naaman, it is so hard to cross the boundaries of our own land, the safety of our own communities, the strength and riches of our own territory.

I believe this situation can be a good story for us today: I wonder how an unknown person can carry out some of God's unexpected gestures of grace and power to us... how much a person whom I don't know, can carry God's healing for me and for my community... how much a person or a community whom I never considered or met before can hold God's secret and redemption...

Let me tell you a story: in 1994 I got a scholarship to go to Switzerland and study at the University of Geneva and the World Council of Churches. I lived there for six months, had many experiences and got a theological specialization in ecumenics. After that time, I went back to Brazil, assured by my colleagues and myself that I would get a very good position in a promising church.

Not long after my arrival, I got an invitation from a thriving church that offered me a great salary package. While I was in the process of dealing with them, a friend of mine asked me if I wanted to teach a Sunday school in a very small church in the outskirts of Sao Paulo in a shanty town about 2 hours from my home. I was free that Sunday and decided to go. I knew they were also looking for a pastor but their situation was very difficult. They were struggling financially and no pastor wanted to travel that long of a distance to minister to them, especially without the assurance of a salary. The Presbytery couldn't help either. Yet, they were still hoping that they could come up with enough money for a part time position.

I was sure they would approach me and ask if I was interested in applying for the job. As I waited for the elders to approach me outside of this small white boxed church with only chairs, a torn table, a pulpit and an old third-hand pump organ, I was ready to say that I couldn't do it because I was already in process with another church. But for my surprise, they did not mention anything about ministry. I went back home and I called this friend of mine and told him what had happened and about my surprise that they did not invite me to apply for the position. My friend told me that they knew I was coming from Europe and there would be many other churches that would offer me a job with much better conditions. And he added: "They know you would never consider them."

"They know you would never consider them"...

These words pierced my soul... That conversation came to me as a painful and unexpected surprise. It broke me into pieces. Finally, I could see how arrogant I was, how

powerless I was. How could I have let this sense of pride and certain fame take my heart so foolishly. After a week of intense prayer and anguish I asked this friend of mine to set me up again for their next Bible school and so he did. I got there and they were surprised to see me again. After the service, again, nobody talked to me about ministry. Then I asked one of the elders if it was possible to gather the elders of the church because I wanted to talk to them. After an hour, the whole session was in the church. I then proceeded and asked them if THEY would consider me as a candidate for the position. At first they said no because they did not know if they would be able to pay me enough. In their entire history, they could never afford a pastor. I then went on to say that I would take whatever they had to offer me. We prayed and they said they would answer to me next week. It was not an easy decision for them but at the end of the week they invited me to be their pastor. I stayed in this tiny small church in the outskirts of Sao Paulo for more than two years and it was the most powerful time of my ministry. I was rarely paid but it was the richest time of my life with God.

There, in the rivers of this small Presbyterian Church in Santa Fe, I was baptized by God's grace and love in so many unexpected ways and gestures. In the rivers of this poor community I was healed from many of my biases, my bitterness, my anger with God and my fears. In the rivers of a far away and strange land, God touched me through them again and again. But in order to receive God's unexpected touches, I had to accept to go and immerse myself into a stranger river, a river smaller than mine, a river of utter poverty where life was always at stake.

What does it take to immerse ourselves in strange rivers? How can we hear God's call when they come posted in foreign languages? How far can we go without crossing necessary nervous and tumultuous rivers in our lives? What does it take to get us swimming in somebody else's rivers, ideas, theological and liturgical frames, social and economic conditions?

Sometimes, in order to experiment God's unexpected gestures of grace we must cherish, engage and be open to those who are not like us. Turning down our theological fortress once in a while, feeling like never being able to return when we don't find what we were expecting, we must immerse ourselves in unknown rivers, rivers that are neither fancy nor as safe as ours. The challenge is to immerse ourselves not one time but seven times in a river, life, culture and world that are not as comfortable as ours. Sometimes we need to get wet and lose our bearings in order to find them again, more nuanced, more expanded, more acute to that which we could not see before we went to the rivers. Sometimes, unexpected gestures of grace and unspeakable joys can only be found there, in these strange lands and small rivers where others drink, swim, fall in love, go through hardships and live their lives. These strange rivers can also carry the waters of our baptism and the unexpected gestures of God. Every time we immerse ourselves in the lives of the other, we open up the channels of God's grace to start us fresh and anew in unprecedented ways. Even the waters of our baptismal font at the entrance of our churches are constantly sending us forth to unknown rivers.

Like Naaman, go and dare to swim in foreign rivers. It might be difficult, painful, disastrous and even outrageous. But go anyways! They might be hidden rivers of grace where the unexpected gestures of God's joy and healing move.

May God continue to move around and within all of us unexpectedly.

Amen.