

- And poor. And then sometimes back again. Because we love stories that work that space. Between folk up at the top, at the palace, and folk down on the bottom. Particularly if the story, as these stories often do, shows the person on the bottom putting something over on the person on the top. You recall how many parables Jesus told about some little servant. Who, by the end of the story, turned out to be much smarter than the people that thought they were below the master. Couple of weeks ago, the "Wall Street Journal" had a story about a Duke student. A student lives on the end of a dirt road in western North Carolina. Neither of her parents have been to college. And she is here on a full scholarship. But even on a full scholarship, she is having to work extra jobs. The story told about how she has to take care in which dormitory she lives and where she eats in the Duke food service. The article contrasted the gap here at Duke between the wealthy students who are in the majority and the poor students in the minority. And I cannot tell you how many people in my travels the last couple of weeks have mentioned how much they admired that student in the article. It really got to people, this economically disadvantaged student living amid all the wealth and the power that is this university. We love stories like that. And maybe that goes a long way to explaining why that we love today's story from II Kings, the story of Naaman and that little serving girl. Naaman was a powerful general in Syria, a big man, a victorious person. But Naaman had a big problem. He had a dreaded, incurable disease. So you see the story begins with this person on the top who's got a big problem. And then immediately the story moves down. Down to a little Israelite slave girl who's been carried off in a Syrian raid and brought back to Syria. And she speaks. She says to Naaman, he ought to go over and see Elisha, a prophet in Israel, who might find a cure for him. And Naaman scoffs at this. Of course, if you've ever had an illness you know that one of the burdens of being ill is that you've got these people, these medical experts without portfolio. Who, when they are not dispensing expert medical advice they work at computers, or they drive taxis, or serve hamburgers. But once they find out you've got some medical malady they are busy prescribing medication, they're going to tell you about an aunt who had the same thing that you've got and how she got it fixed by some genius at the Duke Hospital. So, why should Naaman listen to this little serving girl's advice? Well, inexplicably he does. But you're thinking well maybe he listens because he is desperate. Even though he's a great man, he's a great man with a great problem, at the end of his rope. Well anyway, Naaman heads out of big powerful Syria for little, captive, out-of-the-way Israel to see this preacher named Elisha. And Naaman arrives at Elisha's little parsonage probably expecting there to meet some wise great sage, some exotic spiritual guru who will give him some secret incantation to pronounce over him so that he'll get some relief. Well this is the book of II Kings, and the book of II Kings, one reason I love the book of II Kings, preachers always come out really well in the book of II Kings and politicians always come out like idiots. (crowd laughs) So Elisha, being a preacher, doesn't even come out of his house to greet Naaman. Naaman has journeyed a long way to be there and he's come with all this gold, and all these special garments. He's dealt with HMO's before. He knows you don't go in there empty handed. And he's over there with all this entourage in front of Elisha's little house. And Elisha sends out this servant with a hand written scribbled down prescription: "Go wash seven times in the Jordan." Naaman is insulted. What? I've come out all this way, I brought all this stuff along with me. You don't even come out and examine me. You send this lackey out here with a note saying to go wash seven times in that muddy little Jordan river? Which, by the

way, is nothing compared to all the great rivers of Syria. Naaman heads for home in a huff. And once again, a little servant dares to confront the mighty man. The role of servants in the story is fascinating. The servant says, "Father, my lord, uh, "if that Jewish prophet had asked you to do something hard, "something great and demanding, you would have done it. "Well, why then balk at some little therapy?" I'm miserable, I'm sick, I'm feverish. I go to the doctor, I tell the doctor I am really, really sick, very sick. I've got the flu or worse. The doctor looks at me briefly. "Nope," he says, "you've got a cold." "Only a cold?" I say. "Well give me something to stop it." "Nope," he says, "we have not found any cure yet "for the common cold. "You go home and you drink lots of liquids." I say, "That is all you can do for me?" "I have come over here, made an appointment, "you tell me to drink liquids? "That's something like my mother would tell me to do." "Your mother was right," says the doctor. (crowd laughs) And I walk out of that office holding two aspirin in my hand and I am determined never to go back to that idiot again. "Okay, okay," says Naaman. And he submits to the indignity of slithering down into this little mud hole, the Jordan River, and he washes. And when Naaman clamors back up the bank, II Kings says his flesh was like that of a young child. Well where are you in this story? And to be honest, most of us here are Assyrians. We make our home at the center of a great empire. A powerful empire. Last fall, I was speaking in Toronto and on Sunday morning I picked up a big copy of the Toronto Globe, and they had a whole section on the American empire. And they said that in all of world history, never has there been such a far-flung empire as America with such a huge army all over the world, such a huge economy, the culture that dominates everything. And do you know what they gave as the epicenter, the summit of this huge far-flung American empire/ The Toronto Globe? Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina. (crowd laughs) I read astounded. They said Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina is the center of what the new American empire is. An empire that doesn't act like an empire but still owns and runs everything from its own center. We, we're the Assyrians. We, surrounded as we are by our computers and our labor-saving devices, all of our freedom and all of our security, we're on top. Last spring, with the students down in Honduras on a mission trip, I was again reminded of what power we have, just power, to live in a place where I've got an automobile. That means that I can travel anywhere I want, whenever I want. I don't have to stand on the side of some dusty little road waiting for somebody to come by and pick me up out of their graciousness. Most of us live in a fashion that for the majority of human history, a fashion that was once reserved only for a very small portion of royalty. There was a time when only kings and queens did not have to do their laundry. So, surrounded by all that power and prestige, Naaman takes a journey to a little third-world country to get medical care that, ironically with all of his resources, he could not get at home. It's a movement. It's a movement I think that not only interests us as a good storyline where the little servant knows more than the big guy up at the top, it's a movement I think that somehow is built right into the heart of this God. Not only in II Kings but throughout Scripture. There's just something about this God that seems to work down in the out-of-the-way powerless places. I know a person, successful, powerful business person who had everything. But, he was an alcoholic. And for a lot of years he was able to hide it, cover it. But then at last having hit the end of the rope, having tried this and that fancy and expensive treatment center, at last he descended to Alcoholics Anonymous, AA. He walked into a dingy little church fellowship hall one night just filled with rancid smoke to a group of forlorn, poorly dressed people sitting around in a circle. First person who spoke to him was this guy in his torn old shirt. And his first words were, "Hey buddy, how long have you been a drunk?" He said it was one of the most humiliating nights of his life. And that night, his healing began. I don't know, maybe like Naaman we've got to get down, we've got to be humiliated before we can find our way to healing of hurt. Maybe we've got, if not hit bottom at least be on

our way down. Down off our high self-sufficient perch. Down toward honest admission of dependency and vulnerability. Maybe that's the only space this God knows how to work. I've noted this as a pastor. I have accompanied big, powerful people into the hospital. And sometimes they've got letters. Letters from the Duke development office saying, "Treat this person with all proper respect and service." But it's fascinating to watch people so big, so powerful in their usual location now in the hospital reduced to complete dependency on a bunch of strangers. Their lives held in the hands of nurses, and orderlies, and maids, and janitors. All people who've got less education, and less income, less prestige than they. Yet now they call the shots, and they give the orders, and they hold that person's future in their hands. In such moments you find yourself letting go of that tight grip with which you hold yourself. You yield to the care of others. You find out that you're not nearly as big, and self-sufficient, and imperial as you first thought. You find yourself caught in this web of dependency. And we need to reach out to some sort of healing that you cannot get just by yourself. We experience a truth that our lives are not solely of our contrivance. Our healing comes not from the officially sanctioned imperially funded means, that is, by digging down deep within and pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps, but rather by reaching out and by being pulled up by another. Writer Anne Lamott wrote what is for my money one of the most revealing testimonials of Christian conversion in our time. Lamott's book is called "Traveling Mercies." Lamott was raised in a well-educated, relatively affluent family on the west coast. Lamott learned the lessons well that we are self-sufficient, potentially powerful, liberal people. We have it within ourselves to make ourselves move well through life. She writes, "I was raised by my parents to believe "that you had a moral obligation to save the world. "But there was a flip side to that credo. "God forbid" she writes, "that someone should ever think "I needed help because I was a Lamott. "And Lamott's give help." Oh, but Anne, as she grew older, discovered that she needed help and lots of it. Beginning as a young teenager, she gradually sank into the depths of dependency upon drugs and alcohol. Her life become completely unglued, chaotic. Although she had been raised in a family that practiced a kind of urbane benign atheism, she was appalled, that was her word, appalled, to find herself drawn to Christianity. She says, "I thought about my life "and my brilliant, hilarious, progressive friends. "I thought about what everybody would think "if I lowered myself intellectually to become a Christian. "It seemed an impossible thing "that could simply not be allowed to happen. "I turned myself to the wall. "I said out loud I would rather die. "One week later, I went back to church. "I was so hungover I couldn't stand up for the songs. "I could hardly hear a thing. "But by the time it was for the sermon "which I thought was the most ridiculous thing "I'd ever heard, "like somebody standing up in a pulpit "and trying to convince me of the existence "of extra terrestrials, "but the last song they sang was so deep, "and so raw, and so pure, I had no means of escape. "It was as if people in the church "were singing in between the notes. "Weeping and joyful at the same time. "And I felt like their voices or something was rocking me "in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid. "And I opened up to the feeling and it just washed over me." She was healed. Notice she said, "It just washed over me." Maybe like that muddy Jordan. In a little, predominantly African American church in San Francisco, this smart, oh so smart, but very sick young woman was washed, clean, healed, restored, saved. I don't know why God tends to work that way. But God does. So if you've got it all, if you're on top of the world well fixed, but there's this habit, this inclination, this tendency, this mess, then unexpected healing like that of Naaman may come to you in the expected way. In some muddy little creek at the hands of some insignificant little servant. In some small, lowly way. Because there was one, one who came from a dusty, out-of-the-way little place. And he stood among us, and he tried to teach us, he tried to show us the way. And we said with one voice, "We'd rather die than be saved by a Jew "from a place like

Nazareth." But we were wrong. Maybe if we big ones get sick enough, maybe if we stumble and fall low enough and get desperate enough, then we'll be willing to listen, to descend, to submit, to come to the waters and be saved.