

## THE HEALING OF TRUST

2 Kings 5: 1-19

Trust... Why is it so difficult to trust?... Whether it's people, systems, the weather or whatever, trust is something that has to be earned over and over again. But why is it so hard?

I remember hearing my parents' experience after the first years being in Canada as immigrants from Greece. Even as Greece is now a developed country and part of the European Union, the second world war totally devastated Greece and it took many decades for things to settle. My parents grew up in Greece where systems of finance, government and services public and private were entangled in inefficiency, corruption, nepotism and a lot of everyone-for-themselves mentality. There was little trust except within family and tight-knit community. My sister was born in Canada and I remember how my parents experienced the treatment my mother received in hospital, or when we got our first heavily used car and needed a good mechanic to repair it. They experienced being treated as human beings, with respect, no matter how little they knew the system or how easily they could be taken advantage of. There was trust, and that made Canada at the time way ahead of a nation back in Europe still broken in many ways.

Trust... But many would say that things have become worse over the decades here in Canada too. Whether it's our neighbour, public services, businesses, or even science, trust has been eroded for many in our society. Security and safety have become that much more a concern. Whether it's our children's safety, the benefits of vaccinations and public health mandates, whether it's because of the colour of our skin, our religious garb, our political alliances, our sexuality and gender expression, or our elderly in care facilities, social trust is not what it used to be in the eyes of many of us, even here in Canada.

And then, there are the very personal experiences in our lives, experiences where we have been betrayed in our trust, neglected, mistreated, taken advantage of, robbed, you name it, all of it contributes to the erosion of trust. Even as most of us have survived the pandemic of several years ago, there has been an erosion of trust in science, a questioning of those who are recognized as experts and authorities by the state or public institutions, and further polarization among people only made worse by social media. Whether someone knocks on our door, calls us on the phone or sends us an email, we know that fraud is everywhere, that our vulnerability is being sought out by scammers, that many of us feel ill-equipped to be safe in this increasingly predatory world.

OK, all this is true, and I'm sure all of us here, each in our own way, will be familiar with some story or incident in our lives or someone we know and care about, where trust has been taken advantage of and therefore now broken.

Yes, this is all true, yes. But the solution to this breakdown of trust cannot merely be a retreat into our own inner circle of me-myself-and-I and my own and to heck with everyone else. How do we rebuild trust again and how do we heal from the fear and even the trauma of broken trust?

Well, we need to examine why it is we cannot trust others and what it would take to trust them. Are we willing to risk some trust in order to build healthier, richer and deeper relationships? Even as we need to be safe and smart, are there ways to open the doors of our hearts to others who are very different than us, even perhaps those who we would deem a threat to us? Are there ways to open up to greater trust?

Well, with this intro I hope to have created the ground for appreciating a powerful and beautiful story in our scriptures. Sometimes, the obstacle to the healing that comes with developing trust again is not about overcoming an experience of betrayal, mistreatment or being taken advantage. No. Sometimes, our vulnerability of need requires us to trust in a way where we have to overcome our pride and our inner mistrust of others whom we don't trust because they are seen as different, a threat or even as weaker than us. How much pride do we need to swallow and how much need do we need to admit in ourselves before we approach someone else who can help us with the risk that we can also be taken advantage of, made a fool of, or even worse, ruined? How much pride do we need to swallow and how much openness do we need to risk?

But imagine the possibilities! Imagine the possibilities in an enemy becoming a friend, in trust established from need met, from generosity shared, from compassion experienced, from genuine care given and felt without requiring anything in return. Are such things possible in our world today?

OK, let's work through the story that is our scripture reading more closely in search of revelatory wisdom. The main character who is the subject of healing is a man named Naaman. But Naaman is no ordinary man. He's a commander, a general, the top man of the Syrian army who is responsible for having defeated the Hebrew nation Israel over and over again. Naaman is a man's man - strong, tough, trusted like no other by the king. But Naaman has a serious vulnerability, at least one that has become visible - he's sick with a terrible flesh-eating disease - leprosy. Even as we have conquered leprosy in our world today and there are great treatments for those places in the world where it still exists, in the ancient world, leprosy was a death sentence for most.

So, Naaman is trying to hide his disease, but his family and household, and presumably the king, know what's happening. What will happen when enemies find out? What will happen when Naaman can no longer appear at the forefront of his troops? Anyhow, the situation is dire and Naaman, though not fully admitting it to himself yet, is facing a terrible fate.

But the story takes a fascinating turn when who but a young, Hebrew slave girl has some advice to offer. OK, think about the source and the trust required to listen. This is someone young, rather than someone old with knowledge, experience and wisdom. This is a girl versus a boy in a highly patriarchal world of strong masculinity. And this is a Hebrew girl, part of a subjugated race of people. She represents the enemy, and more importantly, she represents everything that is weak, the total opposite of Naaman and everything he represents - a strong, conquering man.

So what kind of healing does Naaman need? What kind of healing do you need? Is part of that healing a rising up of some trust where only mistrust and contempt exist so far? But that would have to mean recognizing your vulnerability and need. That would mean you putting yourself out there, exposing your vulnerability, risking ridicule, persecution, isolation, humiliation. Can Naaman come out of his closet because the alternative is ultimately death?

Well, even as Naaman himself may be reluctant, he listens to his wife. Moreover this also means he has to go to the king and ask for permission. Will the king reprimand him or will the king also recognize how much he needs Naaman and therefore is willing to risk some advantage taken by the enemy. A young girl, a slave of a defeated, enemy people... how much trust is required, how desperate does one have to be, how much pride does one have to swallow to listen and trust in whatever possibility there may be? Well, but this is only the beginning.

Naaman may be in need, but he hides his need by going to no less than the king of Israel decked in the finery of his military glory, with lots of loot, and a letter from the Syrian king ordering the Hebrews to meet Naaman's healing needs or else! We hide our vulnerability and need, we protect ourselves from putting ourselves out there by putting on everything that makes us great, strong and invulnerable in the world. But what happens? Well, the Hebrew king is understandably petrified. It's as if the Syrians are picking a new fight with this strange request that is more like a threat. How can I, the king of Israel, heal this man of a deadly disease?!

But then, a lowly prophet, at odds with the king, living on the outskirts of town, named Elisha, hears about the situation. He sends word to the king: Send this great general to me. I'll show him what kind of healing a prophet of the Lord God can offer. OK, the king has his own trust issues, but he sends Naaman along as he can do nothing himself. At least he can buy himself some time!

And so, Naaman comes in all his glory, in a great chariot with a small army of men and servants, and all his loot. He surrounds this lowly house of the prophet. Wow! Imagine the sight! But what does Elisha the prophet then do? Think about it. He doesn't go out to meet Naaman and his host, bowing to the ground in deep fear, awe and respect. No. He doesn't even come outside. He sends his servant instead with some instructions. Go wash in our little Hebrew

river called Jordan. And wash seven times because seven is a special number to us Hebrews. That's it.

Wow! Imagine the kind of pride Naaman has to swallow here. Not only does this nobody of a prophet with no official standing or status not even come out to meet him. But he sends him to a crummy little local river. Why not just go back and wash in one of the great rivers in Syria? Is this an insult or what! Who does he think he's addressing?! Naaman gathers his people and loot and leaves in a huff.

But then, one of Naaman's servants, a slave no doubt, rouses up the courage to speak to him. Lord, he says, if the prophet had asked you to do something difficult, wouldn't you have done it? But here he has asked you to do something simple. Is anything lost if you give it a try? Well, to do this, of course, Naaman would have to allow his pride to be knocked down another notch. First, it's listening to a slave girl of the Hebrews. Then it's going to some no-status lowly prophet of an enemy people. And now it's washing in a muddy little foreign river. OK, he'll do it. Why? He's vulnerable and desperate. What's the alternative? Death makes us all equally humble, no?

And what happens? Naaman begins to feel healing energies course through his body. Something astonishing has happened and is happening. How could this be? Yet it is! Imagine receiving test results you could never have imagined. The treatments have worked in a remarkable way. The surgery is a success. You are healed beyond anything you had hoped because you doubted, questioned or had little trust because you didn't want to be devastated.

OK, but there's more still. Naaman returns to thank the prophet Elisha. He wants to pay him. He needs some way to restore his pride. But no. Elisha will take nothing. OK, imagine this now. A general, a top man of an enemy people, a great threat to the Hebrews, is healed and restored. And he is healed and restored without any payment or any conditions! Elisha hasn't told him that he must never attack the Hebrews again. Elisha has not taken all the money and goods Naaman is ready to give him. Nothing!

This, my friends is: grace. And grace received through divine healing love carried by the energy of Holy Spirit as we call it, can do amazing things. It can heal, but the healing is internal as much if not more than anything external. Whether Naaman will live or die and in this case, live, he will be a changed man, a man healed. But healing is about overcoming pride, opening one's heart, risking trust and experiencing what happens when trust is rewarded with a love that is total, requiring nothing in return except calling us to become ever more human without having to hide our vulnerability.

So, here's the final, and perhaps most beautiful conclusion. If Elisha will take nothing, Naaman is finally free to speak from his heart. "Elisha" he says, can I please take two loads of Hebrew

earth with me? From now on I want to worship your God. Why? Because your God is the God of us all, the God of heaven and this beautiful earth where I have been healed. And please, one more thing. I'm asking for forgiveness in advance. When I go back and my Lord King asks me to worship with him in the temple of a god who is no god, territorial and exclusive as he is, I will go and worship with him. But in my heart I will be worshipping the God that is your God and now my god and the God of us all.

Wow! What a transformation. The god of Israel is truly the God of us all. And if the God of us all, can we truly be enemies? Must we not open our hearts to trust? Must we not put away our pride, our pretences, our protective shells and open our hearts to one another?...

Yes, we live in a world where we have to look out for each other in order to be safe and protected. And yet, our healing and the healing of our world has to involve an opening of our hearts to each other and especially when trust has been broken and we see enemies and threats all around. May we experience grace, goodwill, care and compassion all around us, and may we be servants of this Spirit that carries grace, the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, wherever we go and whoever we meet.

Let us pray: Come, Holy Spirit come... Heal us... Heal us of our fear fed by hurt, that blocks any pathway to trust... Heal us of our pride that fears exposing our vulnerability and need... Help us better become brothers and sisters of one another and our mother earth... Amen.