

There is a story in Isabel Wilkerson's book *Caste* that is especially revealing about dignity and humility. In the late 1950's, Martin Luther King Jr. made a trip to India. He was there to meet the prime minister; as a follower of Mohandas Gandhi, he was also there to learn more about his teachings about non-violent resistance. But first, he made a visit to Kerala, in the extreme southern part of the country, where poverty was high and a great number of people were part of the caste of untouchables, the Dalit. Before King was to speak at this gathering, he is introduced as one of the untouchables in his own country. At first, King bristles at this introduction, but he catches himself long enough to say that much of that characterization was true, that he was an outsider in his own land, a leader of people against whom violence and dehumanization had routinely been directed for hundreds of years. King dated much of his future action from that moment.

Much of the same thinking is at work in the story of Naaman that we just heard, the Aramean general afflicted with leprosy. Like the people to whom King was speaking, many of the people around Naaman are practically invisible; it is those easy to ignore, that make possible his healing, his servants, even his captives. The Israelite girl, instead of being vindictive towards him, wants Naaman's household to know about this prophet who is in Samaria who has helped so many. It is on the strength of that testimony that the King of Aram sends Naaman off to the King of Israel, who knows his own limits and believes that they are picking a fight.

The story becomes interesting when Elisha tells the King that he knows what to do with this self-important foreigner. He sends out a messenger, who tells Naaman to wash seven times in the Jordan. Naaman is furious that the prophet himself won't give him this advice; moreover, Naaman knows the rivers of Syria are far mightier than the Jordan—couldn't he wash himself there? But his own servants ask him, "If the prophet had commanded something difficult, wouldn't you have done it?" So Naaman convinces himself to give the advice a try and is completely cleansed. Today we don't hear of his conversion, which happens in the next verse, but we know transformation when we see it.

If it were something hard, you would have done it. If you're like me, those words sound achingly familiar. Being with my kids, now in their twenties, on our last vacation reminded me of all the anxiety I would store up when they were small because I simply felt I could not do my work and look after them at the same time. Because I was playing in a symphony orchestra in those days, I would spend hours trying to figure out difficult passages or try to find a reed that would work while reading, *Go Dog Go*, as they climbed all over me. I wish I had some videos of those times, showing what a sense of self-importance I had for what, in retrospect, seems like embarrassingly small reasons. Most of all, I wish I had had the sense to put down what I was doing and give them my attention, because relationships are always most important. And the problem continues today. People close to me will tell you I am a terrible Scrabble player: I'm a recovering English major, I make a lot of my living with words and I can still convince myself that having to use words like *get* and *the* are simply beneath me. In Naaman's story, these times of ego deflation have come through small voices, the servant girl, Naaman's own servants, but they are critical for understanding Naaman and ourselves. As embarrassing as these moments are, they compel self-examination which is indispensable if we are to be more human.

For King, of course, the story is more complex. His visit to India was years before the *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, the march on Washington, the Nobel Peace prize. Yet he dates much of his thinking about dignity, a God-given sense of human worth, from that time before his audience in Kerala, India. The difference, as King knew, was that caste was part of a social structure that had existed for thousands of years. He knew that dismantling the racism he saw in America was going to be difficult, but it would come through small voices, voices of the dispossessed, to make the position of his adversaries increasingly absurd, not only to themselves but the rest of the world. That work is ongoing, but I like to think that we are clearer about what the stakes are and that, more than ever, we need a combination of humility and a strong sense of the dignity of every human being, something for which many have put their bodies on the line, something Naaman could only achieve after abandoning his ego in order to achieve real healing.

If it were something hard, you would have done it. It is hard to have anything like faith without something like humility. Among the crises we face, and the list is getting longer all the time, are the people who are willing to place their egos and ambitions as private idols, complete with a God on call for unforeseen events. William Sloane Coffin, a contemporary of King's, noted that arrogance in many of the students he knew. "It is terribly important to realize that the leap of faith is not so much a leap of thought as of action...In matters of faith, it is first we must do, then we will know, first we will be and then we will see. One must, in short, dare to act wholeheartedly without absolute certainty." If we note that Naaman's conversion happens after his cleansing, it is his willingness to listen to the small voices of the Israelite girl and his own servants, who likely knew his ego better than anyone else, to convince him to abandon it in the interest of healing.

Having the very poor and those experiencing homelessness at our front door, people much of the world continues to see as invisible, I believe we need to embrace this idea of dignity and humility ever more firmly. Our own healing begins when we see our guests as creatures of God and give them the dignity that they are denied in much of the rest of their lives. I often tell the students here, and anyone else who will listen, that we cannot be complete without them. We are dependent upon them in ways we can scarcely recognize because, as Dorothy Day has said, they are Christ, and what we do for them we do for him. The only way change can happen, for them and for us, is that we see each other through the lens of mutual interdependence, as it is the only way any of us can be free.

We are, of course, on the cusp of a holiday that celebrates our independence. We are learning all the time how limited that independence is and how fragile. If we don't have access to Mr. Jefferson's mind in writing the Declaration of Independence. What we do have is our conception of dignity and reliance that real change can happen, if we are able to offer our humility instead of our egos. That dignity, the dignity of every human being, is given by God and all we have to do is acknowledge it, one person, one healing at a time.