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2 Kings 5:1-15, Luke 17:11-19
In Praise of the Little Maid

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²Now the Syrians on one of their raids had carried off a little maid from the land of Israel, and she waited on Naaman's wife. ³She said to her mistress, "Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." (2 Kings 5:1-15, RSV)

This is a sermon in praise of the little maid. And more than this, it is a sermon in praise of all God's little ones. Let us all stand ready, as did this young Jewish woman so long ago, to be useful to the God who emptied himself and made himself so very useful to us.

The sure foundation of our faith and hope in this world is that Almighty God, maker of heaven and earth, loves us. The difference could hardly be greater between God and us, for he is pure while we are sinful, he is strong while we weak. The children's hymn has it right:

Jesus loves me! This I know,
For the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to Him belong;
They are weak, but He is strong.¹

And it is a lovely thing that "little ones to Him belong." Little ones can hope in the Lord just as much as can the powerful and well-to-do in our world.

But what interests me in this sermon is not simply that God loves the little ones, but also that the little ones can be useful to him. They can help build his Kingdom. They can help keep faith alive in this world.

This is St. Paul's great theme in his *First Letter to the Corinthians*. Our God can accomplish marvelous things with little maids and little ones of all sorts. Indeed, judging by St. Paul, our God delights in using this world's little ones to accomplish his purposes:

²⁶Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_Loves_Me

reduce to nothing things that are,²⁹ so that no one might boast in the presence of God. (1 Corinthians 1:26-29, NRSV)

This passage, in turn, leads to one of my favorite passages in St. John's Chrysostom's *Homilies on First Corinthians*. He takes the growth of the early church, starting from such humble folks as the apostles, to be a proof of the divinity of the Gospel:

For that the Gospel is divine, even from hence is evident; namely, whence could it have occurred to twelve ignorant men to attempt such great things? who sojourned in marshes, in rivers, in deserts; who never at any time perhaps had entered into a city nor into a forum; -- whence did it occur, to set themselves in array against the whole world? For that they were timid and unmanly, he shews who wrote of them, not apologizing, nor enduring to throw their failings into the shade... But nevertheless they attacked all, and overthrew all, and overran in a short time the whole world, like a sort of winged beings; making no account of dangers, of deaths, of the difficulty of the thing, of their own fewness, of the multitude of the opponents, of the authority, the power, the wisdom of those at war with them. For they had an *ally* greater than all these, the power of Him that had been crucified and was risen again.²

Ponder this and be encouraged, for you have this ally too.

Consider the role of the little ones in the story of Naaman and his leprosy. This is a story in which the insignificant ones -- the enslaved girl and the servants to Naaman -- are the heroes, for they are the ones who are open to the divine dimension.

The maid, according to our text, had been carried off from the land of Israel by the Syrians on one of their raids. That is a hard blow in a young life. Imagine her grief to be taken from her family and her familiar ways, her apprehension to be in the hands of strangers whose tongue she could not understand, her terror at what was going to become of her. But some hearts are flexible and give their love easily. Such a heart seems to have been hers. She becomes part of an alien household -- a servant to Naaman's wife -- and in that role, she seems to have developed affection both for her mistress and master. From her childhood, she has learned the good news that with the Lord there is salvation, and she does not hesitate to share her gospel with her captors:

³She said to her mistress, "Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

² Saint Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Volume 12, originally published in 1889. Edited by Philip Schaff. (Hendrickson Publishers: Peabody, MA, Second printing 1995), pages 20 and 21.

In this way she starts the sequence that leads to health for her master and the spread of Israel's faith abroad, even to one of Syria's leading commanders.

But the path is a long one and comes to the brink of failure when Naaman refuses to dip himself in the waters of the Jordan River. If this story depended simply on the deeds of those of high rank, it would have failed. King writes to king, the commander comes bearing official gifts fit for diplomatic affairs, the commander visits the mighty prophet Elisha, who sends him instructions, but refuses to meet with the man. And the mighty commander is offended at the prophet and his ways and determines to go home, unhealed.

The matter would have failed had it not been that the servants of Naaman stepped forward and joined the ranks of the little maid in their goodness. With tenderness, they spoke good sense to the man:

¹³But his servants came near and said to him, "My father, if the prophet had commanded you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much rather, then, when he says to you, 'Wash, and be clean'?"

So, Naaman did it. He washed and was made clean. He was saved from a misstep by lowly servants willing to speak up and to say the fit word.

The Bible has more stories like this one, where a captive has such a large heart that he or she proves a strong blessing in the life of the captor. We have Joseph down in Egypt, honoring his master Potiphar by refusing to have an affair with his wife, who interpreting dreams for those in prison with him and for Pharaoh, and who gave the advice to save great stores of harvest during the seven fat years that the people might be spared famine during the seven lean years.

Likewise, we have Daniel, who served the Babylonian kings with such integrity that his opponents could find no grounds of complaint in his administration.

And in the New Testament, the holy Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is launched not by a king or a commander or a wealthy person, but by a village handmaiden named Mary.

Let us never underestimate the crucial role that you and I can play in helping others and in spreading abroad faith on earth -- a crucial role we may play however little or lowly we might be.

Now, consider the leper in today's Gospel story -- the one leper who returned to give thanks and to praise God for his healing. This poor man was the lowest of the low. Of the ten lepers, he was the Samaritan. We know from the story of the Woman at the Well that Jews and Samaritans have no dealings with one another:

The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. (John 4:9, RSV)

So, that is one strike against him: Jesus is a Jew, while he is a Samaritan.

But the major strike against him is that he is a leper. The law of Israel was clear and firm in pushing the leper away from healthy folk:

⁴⁵The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean."⁴⁶He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp. (Leviticus 13:45-46, NRSV)

Jesus had mercy on the whole group of ten lepers, and there is no sign that he regrets that he healed them. Ten lepers cried out to him for mercy, and all ten were cleansed.

But it does seem to me that there is a certain kind of sadness in Jesus about this incident. He seems disappointed that only one of those who had been healed came back to thank him. I do not doubt that the other nine lepers went to the priests, as Jesus instructed them, and gave thanks to God. Jesus let them go in peace, and I hope they enjoyed their newfound health. Still, there is some sorrow in this story.

Because you see, it might be a humble deed to do, to return and to give thanks to someone who has so improved your life, but of such humble deeds the Lord is glad to build his kingdom. That lowly one, the lowliest of the lepers, did return to Jesus and with a loud voice gave his testimony to our Lord:

¹⁵Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with *a loud voice*; ¹⁶and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving *him* thanks. (Luke 17:15-16, RSV)

And that loud, happy voice of the one healed leper might have fallen upon the ears of some other despondent soul in those parts, and thereby, that one too could have been drawn to Jesus, our Saviour. God bless that poor leper man. He had been a shunned person in that society, yet he made himself useful to our Lord Jesus, and that is a great thing.

The little maid gave faithful counsel to her master. The servants gave faithful counsel to their master. And the lowliest of the lepers came back to say thanks to Jesus. They were not glorious people doing glorious deeds. They were not knights charging into battle against dragons. They were simply people of faith who actually put one foot in front of the other and let their faith lead them into some goodness in this world.

And now it is our turn to do such good deeds. Glad to say, the liturgy is structured in such a way that we are soon to take our place at the shoulder of the Samaritan leper and to walk back toward Jesus to give him thanks. In the Great Thanksgiving we join our voices to the leper of old and render our thanks to God who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son to die for us that we might have everlasting life.

But after that, we have a week stretching ahead of us. In this town, in this

glorious New York City, each of us, to some degree, is a little maid. The relations of power and subordination are as numberless as the stars in the sky. Unless you are a CEO, you are a servant to others, and even the CEO can be fired.

But even a lowly maid can be useful to others. Indeed, each of us, high or low, should pray to be useful to our one great Master, even Jesus Christ our Lord.

Some of the people we are going to encounter during this coming week are going to be sad, and could use a word of encouragement, especially that good encouragement that comes from speaking of Jesus as their Saviour.

Some of the folks we encounter will be worn out. Maybe they will be colleagues or supervisors whose life would be made a bit better this week if we would work hard at doing our job well.

Some of the people we meet this coming week might be confused or straying, and you or I might be the one in the perfect position to help shepherd that straying one back to health and to Christ.

The generosity of the Lord is such that he not only loves the lowly ones of earth but entrusts to each of them some labor by which they can help make things better. As St. Paul said, there is a diversity of gifts of the Spirit, but to each of us is given some grace:

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12:7, RSV)

Indeed, the highest gift is available to each of us: the gift of love. The little maid and the servants of Naaman showed such love long ago. Now is a good time. Now is a lovely time to follow their example. Even more it is a good time follow the example of the One who emptied himself and became lowly that we might be elevated all the way to heaven, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.