

Perpetual shalom: Elisha's gift to Naaman

by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [August 8, 2012](#) issue



Pieter de Grebber, *Elisha refuses the gifts of Naaman*, 1637.

I worked in a filling station for four years. One day I hurt my back working under the grease rack, and for a while my father, a rural pastor, regularly drove me 12 miles from our small town to another small town to see a chiropractor. Dr. Holt was an old-time jerk-and-twist chiropractor and a Missouri Synod Lutheran layman—what else could he have been in a Missouri town called Concordia? He usually charged \$3 for an adjustment, but after every appointment my dad would say to him, “Well, Doc, what do I owe you?” and every time Dr. Holt would answer, “Just a dollar, Reverend.” My dad wanted to be fair, but he was poorly paid himself. So the two of them—the Missouri Synod Lutheran layman and the Evangelical and Reformed pastor—always did this delicate dance of payment.

Of course, my dad was not the last guy to worry about paying for health care, but these days he wouldn’t have to ask. The doctor’s staff would tell him about the co-payment, a concept that would have confounded both Dad and Dr. Holt.

Another guy who wanted to settle up for his health care was Naaman, the big-time Syrian general. Remember Naaman in 2 Kings 5? He was a political general, a kind of Colin Powell back in Damascus. He looked in the mirror one day and noticed spots on his nose. It was leprosy, a social disease that would exclude him from public life and threaten a career backed by an impressive set of medals. Then a young slave girl, captured in one of Syria’s many wars with Israel, told him about healing available from “the prophet who is in Samaria.” The general promptly went to

Samaria.

After first going to the Israelite king in Samaria, much like the wise men who first mistakenly consulted Herod (Matt. 2:1-2), the general found his way to Elisha, the unimportant prophet. The first meeting between them did not go well. The general expected to be received like a military celebrity, but Elisha did not even get up out of his chair, because in the calculus of a prophet, a general is no big deal. Generals come and go. Elisha sent word to Naaman to, in effect, “take two aspirin and call me in the morning.” Actually, he told Naaman to go dip seven times in the Jordan, that boundary marker that would eventually become the waters of baptism.

When the general saw the Jordan, he was insulted by the piddling, muddy stream. Despite his resistance, his aides persuaded him that, since he had traveled so far, he should step into the river. (It was like going to Mexico to get peach seed treatment for cancer.) He entered the water—and was healed! The prophet had power! The treatment worked! His flesh, we are told, was like that of a little boy, sweet smelling and soft, with no more scabs or scales.

The general was ecstatic. Now he could return to his public posturing back in Damascus. This wonder brought him to a faith of sorts: “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel” (2 Kings 5:15).

Then it was time to pay the bill. Naaman managed to get his thanks and payment settlement into one sentence: “Praise the Lord—and what do I owe you, doctor?” At that moment, he would have paid anything; he was so glad and so grateful, so grateful to the God of Israel, whom, incredibly, he did not name. The two of them haggled. The cure cost only \$3, how about a dollar? The prophet waved him off: “As YHWH lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!”

Elisha named the God whom the general had not named; he attributed the healing to this God of life and refused payment. He asked for even less than Dr. Holt had asked for a chiropractic adjustment. They haggled, and “[Naaman] urged him to accept, but he refused” (v. 16).

Well, if it’s free, thought the general, I’ll ask for more, maybe for two mule-loads of soil to take home because, he says, “Your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except YHWH” (v. 17).

This time he named YHWH. He got it right. He knew about theological particularity. This was no generic God. This was the God of the land of promise, the one who emancipates and who makes all things new. But the general's speech to the prophet of healing continued with the adversative conjunction *but*, as though the general were about to reverse field. He did it smoothly because he was a master at political rhetoric—or because, in his moment of ecstasy, he did not notice the contradiction. Or maybe he knew in that instant that he had promised too much, that he had promised to worship only YHWH. He had already said: “Your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except YHWH.”

Now he added:

But may YHWH pardon your servant on one count; when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down to the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the YHWH pardon your servant on this one count (v. 18).

The general knew he had committed an affront against Elisha and against Elisha's God. In this long sentence he had named Rimmon, a state god in Damascus, three times: “house of Rimmon . . . house of Rimmon . . . house of Rimmon.” He was anticipating the great public liturgy in Damascus, and he did not intend to miss out on it. We know nothing about Rimmon, who is never mentioned again anywhere, though there is speculation that he may have been linked to a bigger Syrian god. But the three mentions of him are sandwiched between two pleas for forgiveness in verse 18: “May YHWH pardon your servant on one count. . . . May YHWH pardon your servant on this one count.”

Naaman had made a double petition for forgiveness that enfolds the threefold name of the Syrian idol.

The general was no fool. But he felt he had to say the name Rimmon. He had to be honest. When he returned home, after all, there would be a glorious welcome for him, a royal reception with a banquet, a pageant and a procession to the temple. He would walk alongside the king, who would lean on his arm. The general had spent his entire military career getting to this moment of “God and country.” In deciding to go for it, he no doubt said to Elisha something like this: “I hope you will understand why. I hope you will understand that it is a performance that is not theologically serious but politically necessary. I hope you will see that Rimmon has no real power,

and that you won't let that discount my affirmation of YHWH, who is so important to you."

Well, that's the way it is sometimes. You do your best, honest, gentle work in prophetic summoning, wise pastoral leadership and gracious attentiveness. You drive distances for the people and make gestures and tell the truth. You spend long hours at the hospital with them, and let yourself be so deeply inconvenienced that it vexes your spouse. You pour out your word and your heart and your life, and the response is a glaring compromise or a shocking contradiction or selfish cynicism—all dimensions of self-investing idolatry.

Oh yes, we love the church, but we have a boat. Yes, we love the Lord, but George is being inducted into the marines on that day. We care about the budget, but have our eye on a large summer home. Yes, justice is important, but we hate welfare cheats. Yes, reverend, we support you, but we have other passions and commitments. (By the way, what did you do with the flag that honors Rimmon?) We're overextended just now, what with private school and soccer camp at Notre Dame and Italy next summer. We are so grateful for your ministry, so glad that God's love for us is unconditional, so grateful that we are justified by grace. We will do what we can—and stay mellow.

Every preacher knows about lepers who have been healed, cared for, visited, forgiven and cherished. Every preacher knows about the ex-lepers who want to pay up with a gesture so that they do not remain indebted. They want to rush back to business as usual and do not intend to change anything, no matter what was said in the first ecstatic moment of wellness. Every preacher knows that such gratitude is fleeting and unsustainable. These are small compromises that seem acceptable to me, even if you, pastor, have an overdeveloped sensibility about them. What does a little Sunday morning soccer matter, or a flag in church, a little self-indulgence about consumerism or a little spirituality that does not need so much religion? Let everything be sandwiched between "May the Lord forgive" and "May the Lord forgive on this one count." This other stuff is innocent enough—but I am going to do it. See you in Damascus at the liturgy!

We expect a ferocious response from Elisha to the general's idolatry. He must have wanted to say, with Elijah and with every honest preacher, "If YHWH is God, serve him; but if Rimmon is god, serve him, but then don't come to me to fix your leprosy."

But Elisha didn't respond in that way. Apparently unlike Elijah with his fierceness, Elisha had taken clinical pastoral education. To the ex-leper, who had just announced brazenly that he intended to worship a false god, Elisha said, "Go in peace. Shalom." He didn't scold or reprimand or even instruct. He didn't even say, "Just a dollar." It was all free! Elisha expressed no recrimination or rebuke of the ex-leper's intention. He was ready to accept the general's intentions without retaliation.

Why? Because Elisha is focused elsewhere. He is not in the business of barter, of making trade-offs of healing for a continued devotee.

Elisha dismisses the general with shalom because he is in the shalom business and knows that he has done good, creating a zone of shalom where there had been only the power to death.

Elisha dismisses the general with shalom because he is focused on the release of healing juices that have been entrusted to him, and that is all that matters.

Elisha dismisses the general with shalom because he knows that leprosy makes any contribution to the common good impossible, and he has contributed mightily to the common good by overcoming this dread disability.

Elisha dismisses the general with shalom because YHWH has been praised by a general who has acknowledged, with the Heidelberg Catechism, that YHWH is "the only source of comfort and strength in this age and in the age to come."

Elisha dismisses the general with shalom because he imagines that he has contributed to a possible peace between Israel and Syria, which are perpetually, and even now, at war.

Elisha dismisses the general with shalom because he knows that in the abundance of YHWH, it is all free; love will win and defeat leprosy and every other disability that stalks among us.

Take all of it then:

- a zone of shalom
- a release of healing juices
- a contribution to the common good
- praise for YHWH
- a contribution to possible peace

- an abundance from YHWH

Elisha was not going to be vexed by the overt idolatry on the part of the healed general because he kept himself focused on the performance of shalom, not barter; on a contagious neighborliness and not on a big, burdensome apparatus or system. Given his portfolio for shalom, Elisha had other important work yet to do (see 2 Kings 6-9). He had other axes to raise in a swamp, banquets to serve to the enemy army, famines to end and social revolutions to instigate. He would not linger over what had been done or have been bent out of shape by the idolatries that arose because other gods offered better public performances. He was bent toward the future in confidence that more wondrous acts of shalom could be done in days to come. He was unbothered and unencumbered by this ex-leper and his necessary idolatries.

Elisha stood at the door of his house, watching as the general and his entourage mounted their horses and headed back to Damascus. He watched as they moved toward the edge of the horizon. Then he noticed another horseman riding quickly after the general and his party. He recognized Gehazi, one of his leading laymen, a member of the vestry who worried about the budget, the stated clerk who believed that everyone should be called to account. This Gehazi represented and embodied all the good churchpeople who care a lot about the church but do not quite subscribe to Elisha's conviction that it is all free without co-payment, all a gift of shalom.

Gehazi rode toward the general in order to plead for money. Can you contribute to the health program of the church? How about a onetime gift? How about a continuing pledge of support? Gehazi, an inventive stewardship proponent, became an extortionist who knew no more about free health care than did the general; neither of them understood the mystery of shalom. Both had a business model of co-pay in their heads. He planned his appeal to the general: "As the Lord lives, I will run after him and get something out of him" (v. 20).

Approaching Naaman, Gehazi claims that the prophet has changed his mind: "My master has sent me to say, 'Two members of a company of prophets have just come to me from the hill country of Ephraim; please give them a talent of silver in two bags and two changes of clothing'" (v. 22).

A leading layman and a general were bargaining, a "supporter" and a "client," neither one understanding. Naaman thought Gehazi's request was a fair one.

“Please accept two talents.” He urged him, and tied up two talents of silver in two bags with two changes of clothing, and gave them to two of his servants, who carried them in front of Gehazi. When he came to the citadel, he took the bags from them, and stored them inside. (vv. 23–24)

For the general it was a small cost for the gift of being an ex-leper. “Just a dollar,” and all accounts were settled and nothing more was owed. The general got off light, and Gehazi helped the budget of the health operation. But Elisha was aware of it all.

Elisha: “Where have you been, Gehazi?”

Gehazi: “Your servant has not gone anywhere at all.”

Elisha: “Did I not go with you in spirit when someone left his chariot to meet you? [Elisha must have tapped his head knowingly.] Is this a time to accept money and to accept clothing, olive orchards and vineyards, sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves?” (vv. 25–26)

Elisha engaged in hyperbole to intensify his indictment of Gehazi; he listed much more than Gehazi thought to ask from the general. But the principle is the same. Gehazi was dumbfounded and did not dare to speak again. I see you! Elisha was saying. You con man! You distorter of the shalom business! You have charged for my gift. You act as though this is all quid pro quo.

He said to Gehazi, “Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you, and to your descendants forever” (v. 27).

God would not be mocked. By the end of the episode the leprosy had been transferred from the foreign general to the local busybody. The transfer must have pleased Elisha—the way one feels after a contentious session meeting with elders who do not get it. A little leprosy rightly assigned is good!

We are called to be like Elisha in the shalom business. We are to be on alert when our close comrades do not get it, and to be not much vexed when the ex-lepers rush back to their idolatries. We are the only ones in town who stand against the quid pro quo and know that leprosy can be wiped out only with the free gift of shalom. We dare to enact shalom and then move on to the next chance of performing shalom again, not lingering over the betrayal and ingratitude that seems to come with it. Such a calling is impossible for us unless we find those who will affirm us in our own

idolatries, both overt and covert, and nonetheless give us freedom from the leprosy that we cannot shake off for ourselves.

It is no wonder that when Jesus had to justify himself at Nazareth (Luke 4:16–30), he reached back to cite the uncommon case of the foreign general who turned out to be an ex-leper, idolatry and all. “There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was healed except Naaman the Syrian.”

They heard him and were enraged about the chance of shalom spilling over freely among foreigners. The general will have his king in Damascus leaning on his arm when they enter the house of Rimmon. But not us! We lean on another arm—an everlasting arm. As the hymn suggests:

What a fellowship, what a joy divine,  
leaning on the everlasting arms!  
What a blessedness, what a peace is mine,  
leaning on the everlasting arms.

By that fellowship and that assurance free for shalom, Elisha kept himself free for the gift of shalom. It is the same gift with which we engage every day, a small operation that transforms the world, one leper at a time.

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