

Inspecting Our Prospects

2 Kings 5:1-14 Matthew 10:40-11:6

July 4, 2010 J. S. O'Neill

2 Kings 5:1-16 *Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. ² Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³ She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." ⁴ So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. ⁵ And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. ⁶ He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." ⁷ When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." ⁸ But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." ⁹ So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. ¹⁰ Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." ¹¹ But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! ¹² Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. ¹³ But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" ¹⁴ So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean. ¹⁵ Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant."*

Matthew 10:40 - 11:6 *"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹ Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; ⁴² and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple-- truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."*

11:1 *Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities. ² When John heard in*

prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples³ and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"⁴ Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see:⁵ the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

Consider the word respect. The *-spect* part of this word is from the Latin meaning to see: *prospect* – to look forward upon a pleasant possibility or landscape; *introspection* – to look inward and reflect; *spectacular* – you heard, I'm sure, about the man who fell into a lens-grinding machine at Pearle Vision and made a spectacle of himself; even *species* is a form of the word, referring to a group of animals which in some ways look alike.

Literally *re-spect* means to take a second look at something or to look at someone in a new and special way. The meaning expands to a sense of esteem and high regard. *Dis-respect* is, of course, the opposite – scorn instead of applause. In today's vernacular, disrespecting someone has been shortened to simply *dissing* someone, which is perceived as an act of aggression and not infrequently a prelude to something violent.

Let it be enough to say that in the politics of human life, the challenge of building or diminishing relationships, holding together or breaking apart as a society, doing justice or injustice, and making choices that either build up our souls and the souls of our children or compress them into hard wads of self-centeredness are matters of learning what is worthy of our respect and

what isn't, and acting on these learnings. Someone has said that there are really only three questions a person must answer in life: what is right and what is wrong; what is good and what is bad; what is beautiful and what is ugly. Life's greatest challenge may be to choose what is most worthy of our love's devotion, to decide – in terms of the root meaning of the word respect – what deserves a second look and what deserves no attention whatsoever.

Such choosing is a difficult matter. In this kind of world it's hard to know what deserves our ardent notice or allegiance. It's difficult because we are so very ambivalent about things. We are taught to respect the poor, but it is the rich toward whom we are drawn. We want to respect our political leaders, but it is often the outer margins of society from which come the leaders who change us and force us to grow. We are attracted by celebrity, but we are distanced by the messy lives of those we celebrate. The church has traditionally captured the respect of society, but that's sinking like a stone in our increasingly pluralistic and secular society.

We want to respect ourselves, but we know ourselves too well. As children we are taught to respect the flag, our parents, our teachers, the police. My parents always taught me to respect my elders, which I do, but I keep in mind George Burns reaching his late nineties and saying that meant he didn't have to respect anyone anymore.

King Herod had no respect for John the Baptist. In fact, the king respected no one, except, perhaps, the Roman emperor, at whose pleasure he served. Countless persons became victim to Herod's whims and wants. John had publicly denounced Herod's marriage to Herod's own niece which, though a problem in itself, was made worse by the fact that she was at the time already married to Herod's half-brother, which was further complicated by the fact that Herod himself was married to the daughter of a powerful king of a neighboring territory, who didn't take kindly to the disrespect Herod was showing to his daughter, to him, and to the political agreements they had entered into which the marriage had cemented. In respects to respect, Herod was a disaster.

So John the Baptist, out of respect for what he believed to be God's laws, not to mention just public policy and fairness to persons, had shown disrespect for Herod (and little regard for his own life), and found himself in prison wondering if any human being could possibly be worthy of respect at all. Having heard about Jesus, John delegates a few of his followers to inquire of the man, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

The Bible is sketchy about John the Baptist, but he was clearly a man of note among the people, and that made him a man to get rid of in the eyes

of Herod. We know he was no respecter of kings, tradition, organized religion, or human beings, for that matter. His ardent devotion was to God, and only those persons, institutions, traditions which continually pointed to God earned his respect.

“Are you the one who is to come...?” he asks. His allegiance was to a hope that God’s ancient promise to send a messiah was coming true. Jesus’ answer comes straight out of Isaiah: “On that day the deaf shall hear... the eyes of the blind shall see...the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy...because the Lord has...sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners....”

To jump back several hundred years, among those whom John wouldn’t have respected was Naaman. Naaman himself didn’t know how to respect the prophet Elisha to whom he came to be healed; Naaman only knew how to be respected. A mighty general, his king’s favorite, Naaman is afflicted with at least two dread diseases. One is leprosy, and the other is arrogance, and his life – despite his wealth and power – is falling to pieces. All the king’s horses and all the king’s medical men can’t put Naaman back together again.

So, Naaman, full of macho swagger, his chest so decorated with

medallions and ribbons he looks like a 4th of July float, comes to Elisha with his full retinue in tow and his camels burdened with a ridiculous tonnage of silver and gold. Naaman is the kind of guy who only consults the most expensive specialist. He knows that the best cures are those which cost the most. He's the kind of guy who doesn't just drop in at the emergency room, he has to buy the hospital.

But Elisha, and healing, is not for sale. Naaman, who hasn't the faintest clue that respect is due a person because the image of God is upon him, shows up strutting like a peacock and hiding his soul under the impressive camouflage of power. Incapable of respecting someone else on fundamental terms of common humanity, he can't imagine anyone showing him respect for simply being a brother in need. The soul of this man was in his pomp, and thus he despised Elisha's third-world nation, his shabby little house, and his obscure religious creed, while being perfectly willing to open the bank for whatever magic Elisha had up his ragged sleeve.

Never defeated in battle, he is humiliated by this impudent pipsqueak of a prophet who not only will not come to examine him, but sends out his receptionist to tell Naaman, in so many words, to go jump in the lake...seven times.

The story of Naaman is broad comedy in which the powerful and rich

look down their noses at the weak and poor only to discover that the last will be first and the first last and the topsy-turvy world of God ironically reverses how we think life works. The story of John still hopeful and bold in prison, of Herod plotting in his creepy court, of Jesus embarking on a public ministry of truth-telling and healing, of the powerful and wealthy Naaman poor and defenseless before an insolent prophet...all these at root are classic comedy.

For in reality, the gospel insists, our values – that which we most cherish, that which we give our precious devotion, that which we respect – are so often completely upside-down from God's point of view. The Apostle Paul, not exactly noted as a light after-dinner speaker, nonetheless has his finger on it when he tells the Corinthians, “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ...For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.” (I Cor. 1:20ff)

On this 4th of July we might do well to think how American culture is, like Naaman's, power culture. We could become much wiser people if we stopped for awhile and thought carefully how the respect we give power plays a distorting role in the common challenges of life we deal with every day – problems of family life and child rearing, challenges in political choice, confusion around use of our money, concerns around relations with other races, creeds, and nations, relationships between men and women, and, of

course, problems of the growth of soul – all get distorted around our yearning for respect and our need to respect that which is outside ourselves, but choosing the fleeting, the temporary, the false instead of looking to the eternal and the eternally good. Naaman just about threw his hand – and ultimately his life – away because Elisha challenged his precious sense of privilege and place and power by not bowing down before these empty displays of false value and vain hope ...as do we when we sacrifice our precious devotions that cannot save us.

Scripture tells us that only God, and God's agents who heal our blindness, who strengthen our hearts, who call us away from deadly devotion to the demeaning and dreary, are worthy of our respect. Scripture tells us that the best things in life, God's blessings, are free, not bought or bartered or bullied out of one another or out of God. They're free, and the tragedy of the human comedy we live is that we do not want or trust anything we can't point to and say we earned, purchased, or wrested from our experience because it is so important to us to always be proving that we are grand, capable, and have earned the admiration of the world. So we develop techniques for living, skills for mastering our problems, strategems for remaining in control come what may. We end up implying that life is not a gift, but an accident that needs to be put right.

Somewhere we got the idea that there are secret answers to life's perplexities, that there is some sort of "open sesame" key to the lock on God's private stock of blessings and benefits, that there are technical explanations to why we suffer and why our dreams go awry. Well, good luck in pinning down all these issues. I just want to suggest, with the story of Elisha and Naaman, and with that answer Jesus gives to John the Baptist, that God pours blessings upon you and me constantly, and day by day, year by year we have enjoyed blessings we haven't even acknowledged yet. Our spiritual crisis is here, that healing and wholeness are offered us, and they are free, and all we have to do is find, like Naaman finally did, the humility to respect, ultimately and dependably, the grace of God.