

*Outline:           The power is there  
                      So trust that it's there*

My fellow, beloved children of God. Have you ever heard of Rube Goldberg machines? They consist of anywhere from 3 minutes to a half an hour of random moving parts: strings being cut, hammers knocking stuff down, small cars pushing something, eggs falling into buckets, really anything! All of it just to do one simple, uncomplicated action, like dropping a ball in a cup. Sure it looks really cool, but what good does it do anybody? All this work, all this complexity, just to complete an action that should take you five seconds to do with your own body.

Whether you think those are amazing inventions or wastes of time, you have to admit, applying the philosophy of the Rube Goldberg machines to our lives, that's not such a good idea. Yet we do it. Life is already so complicated, but we sometimes make it more complicated. We have some inner need to build a way to fix our problems. When we see something wrong in our lives, we immediately think that I have to figure out a way to take care of it. What do I need to understand, make better, or improve on in order to make my problem go away.

Think of when you see a dirty spot on the counter. Your brain immediately goes to thinking: “I need something to wipe that up with.” A simple problem takes a simple solution. But what about when you get a spot on the carpet, something really nasty like wine or grape juice. Then you start thinking: I need this and this and this to make sure the spot is all soaked up. Then I need to do this and this to make sure it's really gone.” A more complicated problem makes us think of more complicated solutions.

So when we look at our lives and see complicated problems, we immediately think we have to make complicated solutions. Not happy with my family? I just need to argue harder, make my point louder. Feeling discontent with life? I need to work more often, make more money, buy more things. We assume we have the solution, and think we can clean those spots right up. Have a friend that's sick or dying? Well, I just need to pray harder, make my faith stronger. Lost my job and my insurance? I need to figure out how to make myself more important to God, make him care about me. What happens when *those* spots never get clean? Where does the blame go? God. I figured out the right way to fix the problem, why can't God just do his part of the job? Why isn't he *able* to help me the way I want him to help? We get angry, we get frustrated, and we get discouraged. Then we see other spots in our lives and we think they're impossible to make clean too. I know I love money too much, but that's way too complicated to fix. I know I'm kind of racist, but that dirt has just become a part of me. It's way too complicated to go back now. But we know there's got to be a better way to deal with the problems we face from outside and within ourselves, so we ask the question today, “Can I be cleansed?”

Naaman in our lesson was going through something similar. Look again at his description in the first couple of verses. He was successful at his job, his boss loved him, he was considered very brave. This guy had it all figured out! But then you read that last word: leprosy.

The word for leprosy in the Bible could include a couple of different skin diseases. Maybe it was the one which destroyed your nerves, slowly killing you from the inside out. Or maybe it was the one which formed spots all over you, spots that would eventually make your skin fall off. No matter what kind of leprosy he had, it was incurable. All of Naaman's accomplishments and achievements must not have been very comforting to him, knowing that eventually this disease would kill him...and there was nothing he or anyone else could do about it.

You can tell this bothered him a lot, because the slightest bit of hope, given to him by a servant girl, sent him packing his bags. The girl said, “If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.” This brief testimony gave Naaman all the reason he needed to go traveling south into Samaria, or Northern Israel. All the reason Naaman needed to bring with him an incredible amount of money. What you see in verse five comes to be about 750 pounds of silver, 150 pounds of gold, and ten sets of very expensive clothing. Naaman thought that if he could pay this prophet enough, then he could fix his problem. It didn't matter that Naaman's country regularly attacked Samaria with raids. Everything would work out. He knew how to make sure he would get cleansed, and it was going to be great.

Imagine Naaman's disappointment when he finally found this prophet, found this man named Elisha, and instead of being given a show worthy of all this money, listen again to what happened, “Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, “Go wash yourself seven times in the Jordan and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed.” No great ceremony, no flashy tricks, not even getting to see what Elisha looked like. Only a messenger giving the simple command to go down to the little, muddy Jordan River, and wash.

If leprosy was that easy to clean then Naaman could have stayed back home and washed in those waters! Leprosy was a serious problem, it needed a seriously complicated solution. This way was too simple to work.

Thankfully he surrounded himself with some intelligent people who reminded him that, “if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, ‘Wash and be cleansed’!” Naaman's servants helped him realize that the method of how he was cleaned wouldn't matter if there was power to back it up. So what happened when Naaman finally did do what Elisha said? “His flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.” His skin wasn't a little better or even mostly better, it was completely new. This simple thing didn't work because the waters of the Jordan were so special. It worked, because this was how God wanted to help Naaman. God said this was work, so that means the power of God's promise was there.

This is how God does things. We make things complicated, but he's already made things simple for us. When we think about our problems we have to think about the biggest problem we had. The problem of sin. The problem that makes us angry and frustrated, that makes us doubt God and his power. Without God the Bible even calls us hostile to God and dead in sin. So how do we go from that extreme to being God's clean children?

The apostle John put it simply, “the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” So simple. So complete. Yet it wasn’t so simple what Jesus did for us. He saw us as we were still rotting away with the sin of leprosy. Gross, disgusting people, only looking forward to the eternal problem of Hell. Yet Jesus saw us like that and pulled us close and become one of us. Then he took his own blood, shed on the cross, and washed us clean. Gave us brand new, clean lives. Lives that now look forward to being perfect in heaven.

Can it be so simple? Yes, yes it can. It’s because the power is there. It’s there, because that’s how God decided to help us. Yes, he does use means that we would never think of. Means that are more simple than we would ever imagine. Just look at how God gives us faith and brings us his forgiveness. Listen to what Paul wrote the Ephesians when he reminded them how they became Christians. He doesn’t talk about them following a 7-step program or anything. He simply says this, “You were also included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the Gospel of your salvation.” How did they become Christians? By hearing the God’s Word and the message of Jesus giving his life for them. So Simple.

Think about another one of God’s gifts, baptism. It doesn’t get simpler than that. A little splash of water, a few words, there’s nothing to it. And yet there is so much power with it. Peter told an enormous crowd of people to, “be baptized... in the name of Jesus Christ *for the forgiveness of sins.*” Or something that we see even more often, the Lord’s Supper. Every time we come to his table we’re reminded that Jesus’ blood in the wine was poured out for us for the forgiveness of sins. How fantastic is it that we’re given these enormous gifts of faith, salvation, and forgiveness through such simple means.

They don’t have to be complicated, because it’s not about the ritual or the method or even about us. It’s about God’s power working for us. The same power that God used to heal Naaman, an enemy of Israel. This same power which our Lord Jesus used to create the world, we heard in our Gospel lesson that Jesus used it to heal a beggar in the street. God lovingly uses his power to help his children. He uses it through these simple means to make our lives clean right now. To clean our hurting relationships to clean our frustrations, to clean everything we face.

So what about the question, “how can I be cleansed?” The answer is yes, with the power that’s there. Now trust that it’s there.

When I was little I was really scared of swimming. I had heard a story of how my dad almost drowned when he was little, so I just assumed it would happen to me. Logical, I know. This meant whenever my older brother would throw me into a pool or a lake, there would be all sorts of screaming and complaining. It didn’t even matter how deep the water was. If I was in it, it was bad news. Even in the shallow end my dad would have to take several minutes of repeating over and over again, reminding me that all I had to do was put my feet down. Just put them down and trust that the ground was there to keep me up.

There’s a difference between knowing something is there to help you, and trusting that it is. We already talked about Naaman and Elisha, but let’s compare for a minute two other people: the servant girl and the king of Israel.

What did they have in common? Both were Jewish so they would have both known of Elisha and would have at least heard about the true God and what he could do. Now what was different? The girl was enslaved, taken from her land. Yet what does she think when she hears about Naaman’s problem? “Go to God’s servant! Trust in God’s power to help!” She knew exactly where to look to for help. Then look at the king, he had riches and power, but we’re told elsewhere in Scripture that he worshipped idols. So what did *he* do when he faced Naaman’s problem? “This is impossible! I’m doomed!” He had no clue where to look for his help! Outside of this lesson, which one of those two do you think led a more confident and happy life?

Of course happy doesn’t mean free from troubles. You probably picked the servant girl, didn’t you? Her life was definitely not free from problems. Over the last week I’ve been able to hear a lot about a young man, who is a student at our sister seminary, and his wife. Their names are Paul and Ruth. Ruth’s pregnancy had been a very difficult one, filled with all sorts of pain, especially in the stomach. But she was pregnant with her first child, of course it was uncomfortable. Well that’s what they were told throughout seven months of pregnancy, until a couple of weeks ago when she was diagnosed with advanced stomach cancer. Twenty-four years old. Earlier this week they did a C-section, a successful one, and their son, John, is now in the world and baptized. But they have a long journey ahead of them. What’s very humbling to me, as an observer from the outside, is that from what they write and say, you wouldn’t know how long of a journey it’s going to be.

It makes me think about how much longer their journey would be if they didn’t know their God who took the time and had the power to heal Naaman. If they didn’t know their Lord Jesus who healed a random beggar in the streets. The same Lord who was willing to use that power to become one of us, and to die for us.

Let’s trust that this power is in our lives. Not merely acknowledging, “Oh yes, God is powerful.” But let’s put our feet firmly on it. Even when God’s power is working in ways we don’t understand. When his simplicity is completely beyond us. No matter what troubles and dirt we face, it will never change the fact of his power being there. Of it being right beneath our feet at all times. Right there making us stronger when we hear his Word. More confident when we take his Supper. Comforted when we remember our baptism. God’s power is absolutely working in us through those means and giving us the power, to simply live.

So let’s not rely on any complex Rube Goldberg style of methods to make us happy, to look for comfort, but rather always God’s power. A power that was shown to Naaman, and is constantly shown to us through these simple means. A power that makes it possible for us to say with confidence, “I am clean and God’s power is there to help me.” Amen.