

First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“If God would only do things My Way!”

Isaiah 55: 6 – 9
Second Kings 5: 1 – 14

August 21, 2016

The other night, I was slouching in front of the TV set, remote-control in hand, surfing my way through a digital ocean of infomercials and James Bond film-festivals. When, to my delight, I stumbled upon that classic 1980's movie, *The Karate Kid*.

Now, for those of you who've somehow managed to never see *The Karate Kid*... it's the tale of Danny, a young teenaged guy who's getting being beaten up and bullied by a group of black-belt karate aficionados at his California high school. These Kung-Fu thugs take great glee in making Danny's life miserable, and just when it appears that he's going to spend the whole school year being used as a human punching bag... he makes the acquaintance of the venerable Mr. Miyagi, the handyman at Danny's apartment building who *also* happens to be an expert in karate.

Mr. Miyagi takes a liking to Danny, and he agrees to give him karate lessons... and in the process, he also teaches his young friend many important lessons about life, courage, responsibility, and wisdom. All delivered in unforgettable one-liners, and Asian-American quips. Under Mr. Miyagi's guidance, Danny wins the big martial arts competition, defeats all his former tormentors, and steals the heart of the beautiful girl he's had his eye on for weeks. It's a feel-good story that would make Rocky Balboa stand up and cheer!

And I was thinking about *The Karate Kid* this week... because there's a scene in the movie that really connects with our lesson today from *Second Kings*. And it has to do with “Daniel-san's” expectations about learning the art of karate at the hands of Mr. Miyagi. You see, when Miyagi agreed to teach Danny karate, Danny thought that he was going to be getting traditional “lessons...” just like the big karate school that was home to all his misery-inflicting antagonists. He thought there would be “classes...” he thought that Miyagi would demonstrate all the basics... he thought that he would wear an embroidered uniform with a fancy belt... he thought that there would be endless repetitions of kicking, and punching, and jumping, and throwing bodies all over the place.

But when Danny showed up for his first official “lesson...” he found none of those eagerly expected activities. Instead, what he found was Mr. Miyagi putting him to work washing his classic car collection... with specific instructions about how to put “wax on” and take “wax off.” When Danny begins to protest, Miyagi holds up his hand with the words, “*I say. You do. That deal!*” And so Danny spends the day washing and waxing cars... and when all the cars are sparkling clean, Miyagi tells Danny, “*Come back same time tomorrow, to continue training.*”

And so it goes for many days. Once the cars are finished, there's a backyard deck to be sanded... and Danny's puzzlement continues. After that, there's a long wooden fence to be stained... and Danny's irritation begins to grow. And then there's Miyagi's whole house to be painted... and Danny is convinced that his mentor is simply taking cruel advantage of him. And after several weeks of this nonstop domestic drudgery, Danny has had enough. At the end of yet another karate-less day of house painting, Danny throws down his brush... accuses Miyagi of treating him like a slave... and starts to walk off in a huff, convinced that the whole sorry experience has been nothing but a useless waste of his time.

But before Danny can get away, Miyagi calls him back and says, “Daniel-san, show me wax on... and wax off.” And Danny mimics the motions he used when he was working on the cars. Then it's “Show me, paint the fence.” And Danny goes through the steps of his fence-painting routine. And then it's “Show me, sand the floor,” and so on, and so on, until Danny begins to realize that, with all the work he's been doing around Mr.

Miyagi's house... he has, in fact, been training his body for all the various movements which are necessary for success in karate.

As it turns out, over all that time, and through all that work... Danny was receiving not only the finest karate lessons that anyone could ever ask for, but also some lessons on how to live a life of true character. But he almost turned his back on the whole blessed gift... because Mr. Miyagi wasn't "doing it his way."

Now, as we think about our lesson from Second Kings, I don't think that the great Syrian general Naaman was all that worried about any schoolyard bullies, and I doubt very much that he was interested in winning any ancient Near Eastern karate tournaments. But he was *very* concerned about being cured of the leprosy which had been making his life miserable for years. And as we reflect for a minute on the text, we find that good old Naaman very nearly made the same mistake as good old Daniel-san... as he paid a visit to good old Elisha, the Israelite prophet who reportedly had the power to heal him of his illness.

According to our passage, a young Israelite girl who was serving in Naaman's house, had suggested to Naaman's wife that there was a prophet in Israel who might be able to do Naaman some good. This sounded hopeful, so, after getting clearance from his king and making the necessary diplomatic preparations... Naaman was sent off to Israel to find the cure he'd been seeking, bringing along with him a very generous gift of gold, silver, and some really snazzy-looking clothes.

And, after working through some initial misunderstanding with the Israelite king... Naaman and his entourage eventually made their way to Elisha's home, where Naaman, according to the political protocol of his day, politely waited outside for Elisha to come out and perform his amazing act of healing. But, much to Naaman's surprise and disappointment... instead of coming out of the house to do the job himself, Elisha sends out one of his lowly servants to give Naaman a rather humdrum and simple message: *"Um, Elisha says to go and wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed."*

Which sounds like a pretty good deal, right? I mean, that's exactly what Naaman wanted! Healing! But, as we know, Naaman didn't see it that way. He didn't think it was a *good* deal... he thought it was a *raw* deal. And why did he think that? For the simple reason that Elisha failed to live up to his expectations of how this great healing miracle should be accomplished. So, here's Naaman, coming all the way from Damascus... bringing with him a gift that was truly "fit for a king..." playing the part of a VIP, and expecting to be treated accordingly. And all that Elisha can do is send out one of his houseboys with a two-bit prescription to go jump in the lake? Or river, as it were. That's it? Naaman is incensed, and he reacts the same way you and I might react if we feel that *our* time's been wasted.

"Bathe in the Jordan? I could have stayed in Syria and done that! We've got rivers up there too, you know! I thought that you would come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord your God, and wave your hand over my body and cure me of my disease! If this is your idea of a miracle, you can take it and jump in the Jordan yourself! I've got better things to do than to horse around with the likes of you!"

And, as the text tells us, Naaman *"turned and went off in a rage."* You see, Naaman had great expectations for the way in which his healing would be realized... and those expectations included fireworks, and celebrities, and spotlights, and Billy Joel! It was supposed to be like a Super Bowl halftime show; the Olympic opening ceremonies; a Yankee ticker-tape parade through the streets of Manhattan! It was supposed to be big, and bold, and beautiful! It was *not* supposed to be an afterthought; a delegated task handed off to some underling; the spiritual equivalent of a trip through the Burger King drive-thru! And that's the way it all seemed to Naaman.

So, like Danny in *The Karate Kid*, he turns his back on the whole frustrating affair, and he heads back to Syria, along with his expectations, and his gifts... *and* his leprosy. Rather than wash his body in the Jordan... Naaman washes his hands of his one and only chance to be made whole. Fortunately for Naaman, one of his *own* young servants had some Mr. Miyagi-type wisdom... and he dared to approach his simmering sovereign with the obvious, and reasonable, question: *"My father, 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?'"*

Well, apparently this counsel made some sense to Naaman, and he was able to overcome the folly of his initially rash response. And our text concludes by telling us that Naaman “*went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.*” And so Naaman received the gift that he was hoping to find... but he came this close to blowing it, because he was blinded by his own expectations.

Before Naaman could truly be touched by the gracious power of God, he first had to learn an important spiritual lesson: it’s not up to God to do things *Naaman’s* way... it’s up to Naaman to do things **God’s** way. And once that lesson was learned... then Naaman’s heart was finally open to what the Lord was trying to accomplish. And his life would never be the same again.

Of course, you don’t have to be Syrian general, or a lifelong leper, or a character in a biblical text to understand the importance of this lesson. **All of us** who love God and seek to follow Him are bound by the same spiritual terms which applied to Naaman. We all live out our faith within the reality that it’s **not** God’s responsibility to do things our way, but it’s **our** responsibility to do things God’s way... to conform ourselves to God’s plan... to keep our hearts open to the possibility that, as with Naaman, our Heavenly Father **could** be up to something unlikely and unexpected, right in front of our face!

And that’s so important for us to remember because, also like Naaman, it’s easy for us to impose our own expectations, our own list of demands, our own spiritual litmus test on God’s activity in our lives. And, in so doing, completely miss the boat on whatever it is that God is actually doing. But the truth is that, as we were reminded in our lesson from Isaiah, God frequently acts in ways that do **not** make sense to us! As the Lord said through the prophet: “*My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*”

All of which simply means that, as Christian disciples, you and I should always expect the unexpected from our God... and not be thrown for a loop when things don’t go the way we think they should. When that happens, it doesn’t mean that God has let us down; but it might mean that God has other plans for us, and that we should do our best to trust Him and to serve Him, even when we can’t seem to understand exactly what He’s up to. That’s certainly the lesson that Naaman had to learn... and it’s a lesson that you and I have to learn, too, as we live lives of Christian faith.

We need to remember that, sometimes, our Lord may be moving in a completely different direction from our cherished expectations. And when that happens, we need to stay the course... keep our hearts open... and trust that our Father is always working to bring us good. Even if we can’t happen to see it at the moment! Which isn’t always easy to do, of course. I mean, sometimes it’s tough to keep hanging in there when we fear that God has failed us... and when nothing seems to be going as we’d come to expect.

But if we can just keep trusting; if we can just keep following; if we can just keep reminding ourselves that God is still on the job, even if we can’t completely understand what He’s doing; if we can just do **that**... then our Heavenly Father **will** eventually have His way with us. And our faith will be strengthened... and our lives will be blessed... and we will sense God’s presence and power more deeply than we ever have before.

May we carry that hope, and may we stand on that conviction, into the week ahead... and throughout all the days of our life! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit... amen!