

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: Keep It Simple!

Scripture: 2 Kings

Pastor: Rev. Alida Ward

It is actually slightly disorienting this morning to be talking to grown-ups. Every morning of this past week, at this very hour, I was talking to a room full of primarily 4 through 9 year olds, with a number of pre-teens and teens thrown in. It was Vacation Bible School week, and my role in VBS week is to get up in front of the kids every morning, try to grab their attention, and then teach them a bible story. Which, now that I think about it, isn't any different than what I do up here – try to grab your attention and then teach you a bible story. Except when there are four year olds involved, what I've discovered over the years is that there needs to be just a bit more involved than just standing in front of them talking. Even grown ups can find that pretty tedious – but a four year old? forget about it. So, there are some things I do to get their attention. First of all, I always have a puppet to talk to. Two adults talking to each other? Mildly interesting to a four year old. An adult talking to a puppet? Much better. So that's a start. After then, to hold them, I've discovered that nothing works better than the two basics of comedy: falling down and having things land on you. Apparently, there is something about seeing me fall into a tub of water, get a bucket of ice dumped down my back, or have a an entire watering can poured on my head that makes a kindergartener decide that I am worth listening to. And I am willing to do that ... in fact I did *all* those things this week.

The water motif was actually quite appropriate, because our VBS theme was 'Operation Overboard – Going Deep with God,' and all our Bible Stories were

water based – Jesus in the River Jordan, the disciples on the Sea of Galilee, etc. Those stories I knew well. But then there was this one story, the story our curriculum said would be my Tuesday bible lesson. The story of Naaman the Leper. Whaaaaat?

I have to tell you – and I guess you’ll be glad to hear this – I feel like I know the Bible pretty well. One would hope, right? But Naaman the Leper? First of all – does that sound like a story for Vacation Bible School? And secondly – whaaaaat? Who is this guy? Well, now you know a little about him, because Vickie just read you the story, the story that your kids learned last Tuesday. And I have to tell you – I kind of love this story, now that I know it. You heard how it goes. There’s this man, pretty high-up guy, commander of the armies of Aram, enemy of Israel. And although he’s got all kinds of power, he doesn’t have any power over the disease that begins to consume him, leprosy.

I actually know something about what that looks like, feels like – all of us who have traveled to see our mission work in India have spent extensive time with the inhabitants of a leper colony in Khammam, India – yes, a leper colony in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. House after tiny house, inhabited by people who experience the same degree of shame and shunning that their biblical ancestors did, while dealing with the physical ravages that leprosy brings to the human body; fingers, toes, facial features destroyed by the disease. It’s pretty awful. It’s awful enough that one of Naaman’s slaves, a young Hebrew woman who was captured in a raid on Israel, is moved with pity for him. She lets him know that there’s this prophet in Israel who could help him out; and after a complicated series of diplomatic exchanges between the King of Aram and the King of Israel, Naaman ends up in Israel at the front door of the prophet Elisha, because he is that desperate for healing. And here’s where it gets interesting. Elisha doesn’t even come out of the house. He sends word down to his butler or whatever, saying, “tell Naaman he’ll be fine if he just goes and jumps in the river seven times. That oughta do it.” Naaman proceeds to pitch a fit.

He says, "Are you kidding me? I came all this way and I'm being told just to go jump in the river? I thought for sure the prophet would come out and call on the name of his God, and wave his hands over my spots, say something magic and I'd be cured. Jump in a river? I could have done that back home!" And he starts stomping off, still sick. And then there's this great moment, this great line: Naaman's servants come up to him, as a group it says, and they say: "If the prophet had told you to do something difficult, would you not have done that? So now when he tells you to do something simple, why won't you give it try?" And Naaman goes and jumps in the river. Seven times. And he's healed.

What he wanted was something complicated. Impressive. He wanted the Prophet to come out in a special robe, maybe, with special words and special chants; he wanted the bells and whistles, literally. But it turned out that he didn't need a fancy-dressed holy man in front of him saying magic words. Turned out all he needed to do was to trust and believe open himself up to God's healing and receive. Nothing complicated. God's love turned out to be pretty simple to come by, pretty easy to receive.

I have to tell you, this story really captivated me. Because I actually think it has a lot to say about how we're supposed to be as a church, how we're supposed to talk about God and talk to God. I think it's a darn good reminder that we're supposed to keep it pretty simple and not complicate matters. Elisha pretty much said to Naaman, you don't need me standing in front of you waving my arms and shouting special words for you to be healed. You just need to trust, believe, and go take a bath over there in that river. You have a direct route to God, my friend; you don't need me complicating stuff.

I kind of think that's what we're all about in family of Christians we call Congregationalists, in this denomination called the United Church of Christ. We've always thought that the idea was to keep it pretty simple. We've always thought that nobody should be complicating your connection right to God. That's why we don't have any particular prayers you have to memorize

to talk to God, unless you want to, and we don't have one particular creed that you have to know, unless you want to, and you don't have to come confess to me, unless it helps you. We want to keep it simple. That's why you don't see a lot of decoration in this church, no statues of saints and holy people, nothing ornate, just simple and slightly uncomfortable pews, and a plain pulpit, and a simple cross, and you and me.

And we try to bring that to everything we do. At the end of our Appalachia mission trip, just as a for instance, I offer communion to the whole bunch of teens and adults who've gone on the trip. But it's not communion like anyone of them have come across it before – no bread on a tray, or wafer, no grape juice cups, or wine in a goblet. What I tell them is that I think Jesus really intended Communion to be a pretty simple concept, a pretty easy way to get close to God. He said whenever you share bread and cup together, I'll be there. Remember me. And so the communion we share is what we've shared on the worksites all week – some Gatorade, a peanut butter sandwich, the simple food that's been our simple meal all week. And we know Christ is there. And we remember him. Pretty simple.

We've complicated the heck out of it over the past couple thousand years; we've made it something that has to be a certain way, led by certain people, done at certain times with certain foods. Kind of like Naaman saying what do you mean, he's not going to come out here and say the right words, bless me the right way. What do you mean I just have to believe? What do you mean it's that simple?

It's that simple. That's what **I** think.

It's that simple.

Jesus, if you think about it, kept everything awfully simple. There was one day when a very religious man came to talk to him in the public square, a man who did have every prayer memorized, every religious rule down pat -- and there were in the religious law at that time *hundreds* of rules you were supposed to know. And Jesus says to the super-religious man, you know what – you really don't need all that – here's all I want you to remember: "Love God. Love your neighbor." There ya go.

Keep it Simple.  
Love God.  
Love your neighbor.  
That'll do it.

Let me be perfectly clear. Simple doesn't necessarily mean easy. And not relying on rules and memorizing can actually mean a whole lot more thought and prayer on your part. But our faith comes down to some pretty simple stuff. Love God, love your neighbor. Naaman found that out when a prophet of God offered him a pretty simple way to experience God's love.

There was a piece about 10 days ago in the Boston Globe, by a columnist who wanted to gently remind his readers, after the Olympics, that it isn't just the acquisition of gold medals that makes someone an inspiration; that is the capacity for humility and integrity and kindness that makes someone worth admiring. And, I might add, Neil Armstrong, whom we lost last night, was one of those people. This columnist focused on Sergeant Leroy Petry, an Army Ranger who received a Congressional Medal of Honor this past year. You may remember. Petry was the one who, in a firefight in Afghanistan, after himself already being shot through both legs, picked up a live grenade to save the lives of two men in his unit. The grenade exploded in his hand. And this is what he said to an interviewer, who was praising him for his courage. "It's not courage." he said. "It's that L-word we don't like to use in the military. It was love," he said. "I looked at the two men next to me that day and they were no different than my own children or my wife. I did what anyone would have done."

To Sergeant Petry, it was that simple: It was love.

Last May, I shared a story with you in a sermon, another story I love to tell. It's about a young man named Julio Diaz, a young social worker in New York, who shared this story with NPR three years ago now. You may remember. He was riding the subway one evening in winter, when a kid pulled a knife on him and demanded his wallet. Julio handed it over, but

then, as his mugger began to run off, called out to him, and said, “don’t you want to take my coat, too? it’s a cold night.” He ends up buying the kid dinner. Has dinner *with* him. The kid ends up giving back the wallet, gives him the knife, too. Julio gives him twenty dollars in return. And the kid says to him what probably anyone might be tempted to say: “I didn’t know there was anyone who actually acted this way.” And as he’s telling NPR the story, it’s what Julio Diaz says in conclusion that always sticks with me: “You just gotta treat people right,” said Julio Diaz. “That’s as simple as it gets in this crazy world.”

If you want to know God, know love.

If you want to feel God, be love.

If you want to talk to God, go right ahead, God’s right there.

It’s that simple.

Naaman the Leper found that out.

The religious young man who came to talk to Jesus found that out.

The two people Leroy Petry saved found that out;

the kid Julio Diaz helped found that, too.

This is not that complicated, folks.

Amen.