

His uniform is always immaculate, sharp, crisp, clean, perfectly pressed.

His hair is cut with precision, and his shoes shine like the deep night sky.  
You can bounce a quarter on his bed, and eat off his spotless desk.

He is a military lifer with an equally spotless resume of strategic and field success, and he doesn't just know the soldier's handbook, he wrote it.  
His eyes are afire with a penetrating confidence, and his grip is strong and true, but he will not shake your hand.

He might kill you, but he will not touch you.

His skin is all poison and rot; he is an officer and a gentleman and a leper.

Naaman's world is full of power and prestige and order and ache.

His desk is clean and his skin is not; he has the ear of his king but not the caress of his wife.

He is at the top of his profession, and it is lonely at the top.

But it is also very orderly; he has servants and soldiers aplenty at the ready to do his precise bidding, his job is full of structure and stricture, his world is infused with order upon his orders.

And one of his many trophies, one of his countless captures, is a servant girl from enemy Israel who inexplicably cares enough about him to tell his wife that there is a prophet back in her homeland who can help him.

Naaman gets to work with the exhaustive thoroughness on which his reputation is built.

This chance could be his most important opportunity; this campaign is personal.  
He gathers a letter from the king, seventeen zillion dollars, a full military escort, and a complete spring wardrobe.

He goes directly to the king of Israel, straight to the top, and overwhelms him.

The king thinks it's an impossible political pretense and rips his robes, and now the emperor has no clothes.

Naaman gets redirected to the prophet's house, so the full military entourage parks outside Elisha's bungalow.

The anticipation, the uncertainty, the hope and the fear of disappointment are almost too much for Naaman, never dependent on anyone, to bear as he waits for the mysterious mystic to come out.

And waits.

And waits.

He is not used to waiting.

Finally a messenger comes out...but the prophet never does.

*Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.*

That's it.

The commander of the enemy army is now officially furious.

Not only does this foreign miracle man refuse to see him, he dares to give him orders...strange, senseless, stupid orders.

It was all a waste of time for a man whose time is valuable.

*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!"*

Things are not going as Naaman has planned.

The healing has begun.

*Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?*

Yes, Naaman, they are.

*Could I not wash in them and be clean?*

No, Naaman, you couldn't.

An old spiritual sings joyfully of the messy, unclean, strange, senseless, stupid cross of Christ and claims that there is power in the blood.

In Naaman's case, there is power in the mud.

The pristine waters of Damascus, pure as his perfect laundry, don't have enough dirt in them to make him clean.

Naaman has lost touch with his humanity, a word which comes from the same root as humility, which is humus, which is earth.

Dirt. Soil. Mud. Mess.

*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return, we will say on Ash Wednesday, a week and a half from now.*

Remember what Naaman has forgotten.

Remember who we really are...dust, ash, clay, muck, mire and mud.

Because Naaman is so out of touch, out of touch with his own humanity and, because of his leprosy, out of touch with the rest of humanity, what he needs to heal both his skin and his soul is the messy combination of water and soil, of clean and unclean, of order and disorder, of control and chaos, the messy combination of being truly human.

There is power in the mud, but it will take him seven separate dips in the dreck before the muddy waters restore him like a mannish boy.

The humus has to soak in like truth; healing won't be instant and it certainly won't happen with the wave of a distant hand.

Naaman needs time and especially touch to be healed.

And Naaman needs mess and uncertainty and mud.

This is why God gives us such a messy, living Word.

In our Lenten book Velvet Elvis, Rob Bell writes:

*The Bible did not drop out of the sky....*

*The Bible originated from real people in real places at real times....*

*The Bible is not pieces of information about God and Jesus and whatever else we take and apply to situations as we would a cookbook or an instruction manual.*

*And while I'm at it, let's make a group decision to drop once and for all the Bible-as-owner's-manual metaphor. It's terrible. It really is.*

*When was the last time you read the owner's manual for your toaster?*

*Do you find it remotely inspiring or meaningful?  
You only refer to it when something's wrong with your toaster.  
You use it to fix the problem, and then you put it away.  
We have to embrace the Bible as wild, uncensored, passionate account it is of people  
experiencing the living God.  
Doubting the one true God.  
Wrestling with, arguing with, getting angry with, reconciling with, loving,  
worshiping, thanking, following the one who gives us everything. ( p. 61-63)*

We are not machines; we are human.

We can't be taken apart and put back together the same way; we can't be fixed,  
but we can be healed.

With mess and mud and time and the touch of soil and skin, of earth and its children.

There are limits to our control and the clean, careful order we can impose on life.  
And there is power in the mud.

When Naaman returned to the prophet's house, Elisha did come out to meet him.

Elisha refused the money and the gifts, the vestiges of Naaman's power and  
influence.

I imagine the two enemies shook hands, at which point the healing was complete.

To heal the rest of us, God stepped down into the muddy waters of human history,  
humbled more than even the naked king of Israel or the leprous enemy  
commander.

God took on tainted human skin; the word became flesh and washed in the Jordan River,  
being baptized in the same muck that humanized and healed Naaman.

When Jesus healed the leper, he didn't wave his hand over the spot; he touched him.

When Jesus healed his disciples, he washed their feet, with a combination of  
dirty water and human hands.

And that same night, the night before his hands were ripped open with spikes, he ripped  
open a loaf of bread and said, *This is my body*.

That same night, the night before his brow and body poured out a bloody mess, he poured  
some wine and said, *This is my blood*.

Jesus continues to heal his disciples.

Come to the table, kneel down like Naaman in the river, and touch the broken  
bread from the dirty, healthy earth.

Touch your body with the sign of his cross, and taste the fruit of the vine in whose warm,  
wet touch we still abide--the vine which heals us and keeps us connected, keeps  
us in touch with one another.

There is healing in the kneeling, and there is power in the blood.