

Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation

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Go Jump in the River

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Text: 2 Kings 5:1-17

I've probably learned more from little girls than from anyone else. This might seem too obvious—I'm the oldest of five sisters, I'm the mother of two grown daughters; I've been a girl; I live in girlhood. Or it might seem sentimental. But some of the things I've learned haven't been so comfortable.

Take, for instance, the year my daughters taught me about head lice. When they were seven and nine, I learned that head lice have adapted to every color of human hair, and each color can occupy a head simultaneously, or successively. I learned that 93 stuffed animals are too many to fit in the washing machine, or freezer. I learned that it costs about 150 1990 dollars to decontaminate the bedrooms and shampoo a family of four, not to mention the sixteen to twenty hours it takes to comb out four heads, times five infestations... you do the math. I learned that families who can't afford the expensive shampoos sometimes rub kerosene or turpentine into their children's scalps instead. I learned that a seven year old whining, "Mommy! My head itches bad!" can clear a fancy boutique of Christmas shoppers in less than 5 minutes. I learned that neither doctors, nor psychotherapists, nor even pastors want to see you when your children have lice. And I learned that lice are a profound sign of our inextricable relatedness to one another as human beings, and to the other living things on our planet. They don't respect money, or education, or race, or class, or any of the divisions we so anxiously set up to define ourselves and to protect ourselves from infestations of all kinds. But if you have them, and you can't get rid of them, you feel ashamed, and isolated, and you really can't fix it by yourself. Someone else has to comb your hair.

Why make you feel all creepy-crawly by talking about head lice? They help us empathize with the glorious victorious Aramaean general, Naaman. His "leprosy" is a visible skin disease, both a nuisance and an embarrassment, possibly even a cause for social isolation, although it's probably not the life-threatening leprosy of the New Testament. Even so, it mars and marks *him*, a war hero and an intimate friend of the king! He wants desperately to be rid of it. And he can't heal himself.

It's a little girl, in Hebrew, a *little* little girl, a slave child his army captured in their victory over Israel, who speaks for God. She may be his social opposite, little, defeated, female, of no account, but she brags about her home-town prophet: "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him!" Naaman is desperate enough to take a hint. He gets his king to send a letter to the king of Israel, who has good reason to be suspicious—this is the general who defeated his generals. The king of Israel imagines this is a pretext for still more war, maybe even a Final Solution. After all, the king can't heal anyone, even himself. Elisha hears, and tells the king to send the general his way. Naaman arrives in full military glory, with an imagination full of expectations. Elisha doesn't even answer the door, but sends a servant who says: go jump in the Jordan!

And Naaman feels dissed. It took a lot of humbling himself to admit he had a problem, and couldn't heal himself. Even more to take the word of a little girl. And then to go to seek help from a defeated little country's prophet. And then the prophet doesn't even show up, so that Naaman can demonstrate his humility and his gracious favor in person. Naaman has been shamed by the prophet. He covers his humiliation with anger, and his in-group pride takes over; he'd rather wash in a good Syrian river than the muddy, stinky little Jordan.

His own humble (but sarcastic!) servants speak up then: If the prophet had given him a task big enough to *task* his power and authority—say, told him to go get a medical degree and some research grants and assemble a research team and establish a research hospital for his disease, wouldn't he do it? Elisha just said, take a bath! Well, seven baths, a perfect number. (And two more, by the way, than it took to get rid of our head lice.)

The glorious victorious general listens to his supposed inferiors. When he is done, his flesh is restored; the man who listened to a little girl has skin like a little boy's. But he still has trouble getting the point; This time Naaman does meet the prophet face to face. Once more, he tries to lavish his wealth on Elisha. But Elisha refuses; it is the God who healed him. Naaman must receive healing as a gift of grace from the God he thought he had conquered. And so Naaman requests another gift, the gift of soil, humus from the land of Israel, to take home to Syria, so that he can worship the God of Israel on God's ground, not on his.

The last time I lived in South Dakota was in 1998, for two weeks, on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Like so many seminarians, I thought I didn't need a cross-cultural experience—I had lived in the middle of Minneapolis, volunteering at schools full of children of all colors. I'd even studied Native American history in high school and tutored Native American children. I believed that I, at least, lived in a post-racial imagination. But, it was a core requirement—so I went. Two of us volunteered at the Pine Ridge School, a public school with a small residential program. It cared for children whose families were unable to care for them or too isolated to get them to school reliably in the winter. Shannon County, South Dakota, is the poorest county in the United States. I was there in January.

I had a good time—you will too, when you go for fall break. I worked for a first grade teacher who was organized and encouraging, integrating Lakota culture into a standard first-grade curriculum with grace and high expectations. After school each day, I worked with the resident kids, reading story after story, helping with arts and crafts, and taking them outdoors to play while the school staff took the opportunity to do work that needed concentration. The day before our last day, it snowed. An announcement came at the end of the last cold, bright day—head lice had shown up in the school. All the children were given instructions to take home. I didn't need any.

The little girls in the dormitory were begging to play in the snow, so once more, we seminarians did playground duty. We tried to make a snowman with the dry, cold snow. We tried duck duck gray duck, and after awhile, just plain tag. One of the third-graders, slender and tricky and fast, ran up behind me and snatched my hat off of my head. I turned around. Laughing, she jammed it down on her own head and danced in place, waiting for me to chase her, my too-big hat half blinding her.

What do you think I saw, in that moment? I would like to say I saw a swift and lithe little girl, who despite all the pressures of poverty and prejudice was able to laugh and run and imagine me as

her playmate. I would like to say I saw the face of Jesus, calling me to play with him. But, for a moment—it was only a moment-- I saw something else. I saw an infestation of head lice.

Then, thanks to Christ who dwells in the utterly ordinary things of this world, and in all our relations, even broken ones, and, for me, especially in little girls, I also saw my own illusions of entitlement to protection from nuisances, my idiotic arrogance, my deeply ingrained and socially reinforced racism. I saw that I was thinking I was there doing someone a favor. It's the lesson the seminary, and the church, and God's great creation, needed me to get—the shift of imagination that could make me a full member of the human family after all. Then I was ashamed, although that wasn't what was needed either. I didn't want to be isolated from this laughing little girl, or the wisdom and orneriness and pain and beauty of others I'd met and listened to during those two weeks on someone else's earth. And I knew I couldn't heal myself. If education, and political correctness, and good intentions could have healed me, they would have. The only way to healing was to jump in her river. So, in my heavy lumbering way, I chased her around the playground. When she finally threw my hat in the snow, declaring her victory, I took it back—and I put it on my head.

Now that little girl goes with me each time I go into a voting booth, teach a class, preach a sermon, pay my taxes. I could listen to her better when I shop, go out to eat, drive a car when I could walk. She still points a way to the healing of my imagination, especially the part about where God is trying to be heard in the world.

A post-racial imagination is a good thing, but we—U.S. citizens, Midwesterners, the Augustana community—don't live in a post-racial society, yet. Maybe we will when the little girls and boys of Pine Ridge have as realistic a chance of graduating from Augustana as the little girls and boys of Tea or Brandon do; when they also grow up with enough to eat, and cultural pride, and protection from illness and violence, and world-class educations, and work with living wages, the things that make for achievement. But we know we can't make this happen by ourselves; it's frustrating. It takes an opening up of our social imagination, and listening. And civil discourse, and advocacy, and organization, and voting, and admitting what mars and marks us. And paying for. We all need healing, at least as much as Pine Ridge needs healing. Like Naaman, we yearn to see the prophet face to face, and be healed; but our glorious victorious illusions get in our way. There are rivers we don't want to jump into, humus we don't want to kneel on.

We come to this meal today for the healing we can't do for ourselves. It's not so much that sin separates us from God, who is, after all, omnipresent. It's that we imagine we *can* be separated from the rest of God's creation, and that we somehow deserve it, or don't deserve it, because of what we know, who we are, how we live. That because of deserving we are saved, or not. That our education, or our ability to earn money, or our race or class, or even our determination or charity or strong faith—or their opposites—place us beyond the problems and responsibilities of humankind and humuskind. They don't.

But we are never alone. Even you, Jesus, lifted up on that cross, aren't you longing to come face to face with the rest of us—yearning to be healed? And so you jumped in the Jordan; you rose up from it covered in our mud. And now, you invite us to eat, and drink, and take a bath. You are our food and drink and medicine. By this out-of-place eating and drinking and jumping in the river, we become like little girls—and so do you, in us. Come here, and eat.

BANQUET – Campus Ministry is serving the Banquet, the local downtown soup kitchen, on **Fri., Oct. 15th**. There is a sign-up sheet on the Narthex table. The food prep shift is from 2-4 pm, and the serving shift starts at 5:15 pm. We will be doing some car pooling if you need a ride to the Banquet, which is on 8th St. and Weber Ave.

WORSHIP AT THE PRISON - Campus Ministry is visiting the SD State Penitentiary to share worship with the inmates on **Wed., Nov. 10th**. There are two clearance forms that can be obtained in Carol's office and must be returned to the chapel office **before Fall Break**. This is an amazing, unique worship opportunity that we hope you will take advantage of

OUTREACH – Groups of students lead worship and youth retreats across the region. A great way to get acquainted with a smaller group of students of all ages with a modest time commitment. Applications on the table in the chapel Narthex. Sign up soon!!!

CHAPEL SCHEDULE

Friday (15 th)	Worship, 10 am - Jon Ask, Sr. Spkr.
Sunday (17 th)	Worship, 11 am - Hannah Miller, preacher
Monday (18 th)	Walking Worship, 10 am - begin at the chapel and walk to the library
Tuesday (19 th)	Hymn Sing with Aaron David Miller, Organist, 7:30 pm - Chapel (Reception to follow)
Wednesday (20 th)	Holy Communion, 10 am; Sr. Acad., Angelus with Aaron David Miller, Organ
Friday (22 nd)	Worship, 10 am - Cassie Carlson