

Sunday, February 12, 2012: 2 Kings 5: 1-14; Mark 1:40-45

by [David J. Lose](#) in the [February 8, 2012](#) issue

Ever since I was a kid, I've been intrigued by gestalt pictures. These intriguing pictures contain two images, but the viewer can see only one of them at a time; as one comes to the foreground, the other recedes into the background. In one famous picture I can see either two faces or a candlestick. In another one, I can see either a young woman or an older one. What fascinates me is that it's an either/or experience.

Something similar is going on in today's first and third readings. On the surface it appears that a healing event ties them together, but beneath the healing is the perception of each of the characters as they register what is foreground and what is background.

In the foreground for Naaman of Aram is a particular notion of power. We see this in two places. First, he expects that Elisha, the mighty prophet of Israel, will attend to him personally. After all, he has come with letters of commendation from the king of Aram, letters that twist the stomach of Israel's king into icy knots. Yet Elisha is unimpressed. Rather than going to Naaman himself, he sends a servant to deliver his message. Second, Naaman assumes that his healing should be dramatic, a show of great power. He is therefore not only disappointed but downright offended when Elisha tells him to take a dip in the river Jordan. His vision obscured by his expectations, Naaman cannot see God at work right in front of him.

In fact, God is at work in many small and wondrous ways: in the presence of a captive Israeli girl who has the gumption to confess the power of her God, in the willingness of Naaman's wife to take counsel from her Israeli maid, in the boldness of servants who confront their master with reason rather than curry his favor by indulging his outrage. Interestingly, God is also at work in large matters as well. According to the author of this passage, the Lord gave victory to Aram through Naaman. Seeing his own power in the foreground, however, Naaman is unable to detect the presence of God in things both small and large. Only when he drops his preconceptions and heeds the prophet's command does the picture invert, bringing the background to the fore: "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except

in Israel" (2 Kings 5:15).

In the Gospel story the leper is not blighted by misconceptions of power. Whatever his life may have been—whatever had previously been in the foreground of his world—has receded. He is an outcast, unclean and unwanted, defined and dominated by his condition. When he sees Jesus, he recognizes him intuitively not in spite of, but because of, his great need. He comes to Jesus on bended knee, begging for mercy: "If you choose, you can make me clean."

Jesus responds. How could he not, we may wonder; after all, this is what Jesus does in Mark, casting out whatever stands against God's kingdom and releasing health and healing in its stead. But at this moment in the story Mark offers a rare glimpse into Jesus' emotional state. Jesus doesn't simply cure: moved by pity, he stretches out his hand, touches the one thought to be untouchable and affirms the insight of the man: "I do choose!"

With his brokenness and need in the foreground, this man recognizes Jesus as the one who embodies God's coming kingdom. This emphasis on perception might also explain the next twist in the story. Jesus orders him to be silent. Why? Is it because he knows that the crowds, like Naaman, have confused foreground and background? They will come seeking a miracle worker with the power and authority to grant them what they wish. Jesus, as Mark makes abundantly clear, is not this kind of Messiah. His judgment is expressed as mercy, his power revealed in weakness and his glory apparent only in suffering. Because he is not the warrior king many people expected, those who cherish power and might want nothing to do with him.

It's hard to blame them. Don't we too seek, if not power, at least security, comfort and assurance? Jesus offers mercy, weakness and suffering—things we try to keep in the background. Yet these things are part and parcel of our lives. Although he had power, authority and prestige, Naaman struggled with an incurable illness. We don't know what kind of life the leper led before he was a leper, but he too lost all. Are we any different? Jobs are lost. Relationships end. Success disappoints. Friends come and go. There is an end to all things. God comes in weakness because this is where we vulnerable, fragile children of dust live, and because God doesn't want simply to make our lives a little better but actually intends to redeem them.

Like both Naaman and the leper, we can undergo this change in perspective, release our claim to power or entitlement and perceive God at work in the broken places of our lives. Then everything changes. We recognize that we are loved not because we

have earned the right to be loved but because God is love. We perceive that we are forgiven and accepted not because we have paid our debt or merited it but because God is forgiveness and mercy. No wonder Naaman declares his devotion. No wonder the leper runs to tell others what he has experienced. When background becomes foreground and life overflows with grace and mercy, you just can't keep silent.