

Pentecost-6-c2007

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Luke 10.1-11,16-

First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
Sixth Sunday After Pentecost
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2 Kings 5.1-14

Missing The Point

But his servants approached and said to him, “Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash, and be clean’?”

—2 Kings 5.13

Let us pray: In all that we say and do, may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen. (Congregation is seated.)

The Old Testament story of Naaman the Syrian is one of my personal favorites. It has all of the elements of a great story: character development, political intrigue, interpersonal tension. Jesus was also fond of this story, and he used it once as a text for a sermon that got him in a lot of trouble. It was kind of a Fourth of July sermon on the limits

of patriotism—but that’s another story. Check out Luke, chapter four, if you’re interested.

Today I’d like to focus on Naaman himself. Naaman was the commander of a great army, the army of one of the several powerful nations that held sway over the struggling nation of Israel. But for all of his political power and military prowess, Naaman’s life was made difficult by a chronic skin disease. (In the biblical shorthand, this disease is labeled “leprosy,” though that term was used to cover a variety of skin conditions.) On the strength of a rumor from a captured Israelite prisoner, Naaman sets out on a journey to Israel to see if the famed prophet Elisha might help him with his condition.

As the story develops, it becomes clear that Naaman is afflicted with more than just leprosy. He is also captive to a certain kind of spiritual blindness that very nearly prevents him from receiving the healing he so desperately craves. His spiritual blindness is of a variety that is common to people of great wealth and power, and it is the elements of this spiritual condition that I’d like us to consider briefly this morning.

First of all, Naaman, though doubtless a good man in many ways, suffers from a fairly insidious form of egoism. Perhaps because of his high station in society, he is accustomed to people giving him great deference. He's the sort of guy for whom waiters set up a special table in a restaurant, who has VIP parking at the stadium, and whose secretary has a cup of coffee on his desk the moment he arrives at the office. You get the picture.

So, you can begin to understand why Naaman got so rattled when he had his encounter with the prophet Elisha. Here Naaman has traveled all of this way, secured a special letter of introduction to Elisha's king, and brought generous gifts for his hosts. With his great entourage in tow, he pulls up to the gate of Elisha's house. Instead of welcoming him in for tea and cookies, Elisha sends word (via a messenger!) that Naaman is to go wash himself seven times in the river Jordan.

Naaman isn't accustomed to this kind of brusque treatment. We read: "But 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!”” (2 Kings 5.11) He wanted more personalized attention.

Here he was, coming as a supplicant to God’s representative, and yet he wanted to set the terms of the meeting. Surely healing for a man as important as he could not come from something as simple as a bath in the river! Surely he hadn’t traveled all this way to be treated as a common citizen. He wanted personal attention, dramatic results.

VIPs or not, none of us are exempt from Naaman’s spiritual disease. When we reach out to God for help, we desire and expect dramatic intervention in our lives: heal my loved one, help my family stop fighting, give me a better job. These prayers are legitimate, of course, for we can ask God whatever is on our heart. But we must be careful that we don’t fall into Naaman’s spiritual trap. God is at work in our world and in our lives in many ways all of the time: sustaining life, providing friendship, nurturing routine spiritual opportunities. God’s work won’t always be dramatic and personalized to our specific requests. But that doesn’t mean it isn’t happening. Egoism of Naaman’s sort could keep us from seeing God at work in the ordinary moments of life.

But Naaman had a spiritual weakness in addition to the self-centeredness that led him to expect the world to revolve around his every need. Naaman was, as military people frequently are, fiercely loyal to his country. He would countenance no insult or slight to his nation's honor. (That, by the way, is why the king of Israel was so frightened to see him coming to town.) Still stinging from Elisha's failure to even let him in the house, Naaman was furious at the implication that the river Jordan was somehow superior to the rivers back home: ““Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?” He turned and went away in a rage.” (2 Kings 5.12)

In this Fourth of July week, it is good for us to be reminded that God plays no favorites between nations. It is good that we honor the important accomplishments of our country—a country which represents one of human society's noblest experiments. But we must not let patriotism deteriorate into chauvinism. We must not let genuine love of country become the sort of sneering pride that needs to feel superior to our neighbors in every possible way.

Fortunately for Naaman, he had along on his trip some cool minded servants who talked some sense into him:

But his servants approached and said to him, “Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash, and be clean’?”

—2 Kings 5.13

Wisely (for a change), Naaman listens to his servants and is healed by the waters of the Jordan.

Healed of his leprosy, anyway. Even after the great event, General Naaman misses the broader theological point. Instead of coming to understanding that he is in the presence of a God who is bigger than nations, Naaman wants to pack up a few acres of Israeli soil so that he can worship Israel’s God back home in Aram. Once again, Naaman is caught-up in understanding God in a limited and territorial way. I suppose we do the same thing when we think of God as present only in the church building (or only in nature, only in our flag, or whatever). The prophet Elisha, weary of teaching spiritual lessons to Naaman, lets him load up some dirt on the way out of town: “He said to him, ‘Go in peace.’” (2 Kings 5.19)

Naaman was fortunate to have, at every turn, advisors who steered him in the right direction. It is one of the delicious ironies of this story that his advisors were all people of low social station: the young female prisoner from Israel and his traveling group of personal servants. As citizens of the most affluent and powerful nation in modern history, it does us well to remember that the Word of God will often be heard only “from below.”

Like Naaman, I’m sure that we too will fail to learn all of our spiritual lessons in one day (or month or year!). But, thanks to stories like his, we might gradually be healed of spiritual afflictions as well.

Let us pray. O Lord, we want to make you small, narrow, easily within our reach. Remind us again that you are vast, broad, and high. Amen.