

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
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Proper 9, Year C

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The young Israelite slave girl said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This story of the foreign general who gets a diplomatic pass to come to Israel for healing is rich and textured in many ways. The sheer number of people involved is unusual for a Bible story. The idea for healing Naaman comes from a slave girl who has compassion on her captor. She tells her mistress, the queen, who tells her husband the general. The general tells his boss, the King. The King of Aram values his general so much that he grants him leave and even contacts his erstwhile enemy, the King of Israel to ask for his help. The King of Israel misinterprets this request as a way for the Arameans to pick a fight. The prophet hears of the affair and tells the King to send the foreign general to him. *"Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel."* The prophet seems more interested in getting some good PR for God than in the healing itself. Then there is the prophet's servant, and the general's servants who also have roles in the drama. God likes to get a lot of people involved, it seems.

In fact, when you look at all the actors in this drama there is only one who seems to focus on getting Naaman well, or maybe two. Elisha wants to promote the God he serves. The King of Israel wants to avoid a war with Aram. The King of Aram wants his general to be in top shape. Only the Israelite slave girl and the general's wife seem to care about

Naaman himself. If the young Israelite girl had not spoken up, the general would not have been healed.

Then there is the all too human reaction of Naaman to the manner of the healing. He is an important man. He is the equivalent of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He goes to the prophet's house, which I imagine as a modest house in the country. It must be somewhere near the Jordan. When he gets there, the prophet doesn't even bother to come out on the porch. He just sends his servant out to him to tell him to wash in the Jordan seven times. Naaman becomes angry at being disrespected. *"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! 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. There is not hocus pocus, no liturgy, no ceremony. Then his servants intervene and ask 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'?"* So he does and is healed.

So what do we make of this story, and how might it apply to us? Interestingly, this is a rare case when we can see what Jesus did with this story in his own preaching. In the Gospel of Luke, after Jesus returns from the temptation in the desert, he starts preaching all over Galilee. He returns to his home town of Nazareth and preaches in the synagogue there. After quoting Isaiah 61 he closes the book and says, *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."* Then the people start thinking, "Who is this guy? Isn't he a local fellow; one of us?" Jesus responds by saying, *"Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself; what we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here also in your own country.'*

Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his own country. But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when there came a great famine over all the land; and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. (We heard this story a few weeks ago.) And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha; and none of them was cleansed, but on Naaman the Syrian."

In essence Jesus is saying that the Jews do not have a monopoly on the blessings and grace of God. God's love is not bound by national boundaries. Being God's special people does not mean that God loves anyone else less. This was true from the beginning when God first created a Chosen People. In Genesis 12:2-3 God says to Abraham, *"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. . . in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* In other words, the calling of the People of God is to be a blessing for everyone else. We are called to be the conduit through which God's love flows to all the world.

The crowd became very angry at this and tried to kill him. Why? Because they were human. We all have natural tendency to think everything is about us, that we are the center of the universe. Paul calls this part of ourselves "the flesh," and the deeper, truer, higher self that is attuned to God and moved by the Holy Spirit he calls "the spirit." So in the passage we heard from his letter to the Galatians he says, *"If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit."* When Jesus tells his neighbors at Nazareth that they are not the center of the universe and God loves foreigners at least as much, they don't want to hear it. Sometimes in this country, if somebody says that some other nation or culture has some good things

about it, that person is regarded as not patriotic. The fact is, we are all sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve. We all want a better future for our children than we had. When cut, we all bleed red.

In this country we have been incredibly blessed by prosperity, health, and security. The last significant war fought on our own land was the self-inflicted Civil War. Other armed conflicts have been carried out on other peoples land, with the notable exception of the attack on Pearl Harbor. We are blessed with democratic form of government that allows every citizen to influence public policy. We have a constitution that protects minorities from undue tyranny of the majority. Our economy has for over a century been the envy of the rest of the world. God has indeed shed his grace on our nation. There is no other passport I would rather carry when abroad, and when upon my return the customs official says, "Welcome home," I get a lump in my throat.

The word of God today is that it is our very blessings that obligate us to be a full participant in the community of nations that makes up our world. The blessings God has showered upon us are to be shared and not hoarded. If we are one nation under God then that God invites us to be part of one world under God. And when we find that we cannot heal ourselves or provide for ourselves, let us not say, "Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?" We must learn the humility to understand that as the world shrinks the solutions to our largest problems will need to be found and implemented collaboratively with others. We should never ignore the voice of the child who suggests that we might find a solution by working with people outside of our nation, our culture, or our politics.

At the end of this service we will sing two hymns. One reminds us that there are other nations whose people love them as much as we do ours. The second celebrates our nation and the blessings God has bestowed on it. Blessings are to be shared, always and everywhere.