

Marjory Zoet Bankson: Practicing Detachment

Easter Sunday, July 8, 2001
A Sermon for Seekers Church
by Marjory Zoet Bankson

Practicing Detachment

Scripture Readings:

[II Kings 5:1-14](#)... the Healing of Naaman

[Luke 10:1-11, 16-20](#)... 70 disciples sent out in pairs

This week, we got a brochure in the mail. It reads *"This year 500,000 American families will exhaust their entire savings to pay nursing home bills...Attend this seminar and learn*

- *Four types of long-term care;*
- *Costs of long-term care;*
- *Who pays for long-term care;*
- *Why Medicaid is not a reasonable option*

...and so forth. The brochure is designed to raise our anxiety and encourage each of us to squirrel away more money to buy expensive health care instead of exploring other values and other options that might flow out of this community.

Hebrew Testament

As the [liturgical season of kites](#) and “catching the wind” for Pentecost ends, we have another vivid story of prophetic leadership in Israel, before the time when David united the tribes into one kingdom. This one involves the prophet Elisha, who healed the Syrian commander, Naaman, of leprosy.

As Ken mentioned in the children’s sermon, Naaman nearly missed the opportunity because he was offended that Elisha did not come out to greet him, accept his expensive gifts and call upon the God of Israel to heal his terrible disease. Instead, Elisha sent a messenger out with Naaman’s treatment plan: go wash in the Jordan River seven times. It was so simple that Naaman nearly rode away. Naaman assumed that his wealth and power could buy healing. He assumed the treatment would be difficult and demanding. As a foreigner and enemy of Israel, he assumed Elisha would have to be pressured into compliance. Instead, Elisha offered a solution that was simple and accessible to anyone.

Bernhard Anderson, author of *Understanding the Old Testament*, says that this story is almost surely apocryphal, but “it shows how people could believe, even under the trying conditions of war, that the enemy was included within the sovereignty of Yahweh.” That means the sustaining grace of God was available to all, no matter what their religious practice might be—but Naaman had to do what Elisha told him to do and his pride got in the way.

The story reminds me of the line in Robert Greenleaf’s book, *Servant Leadership*, from which we take our name: *It is seekers then, who make prophets.* It takes someone to call forth the

gifts of prophetic imagination. In this story, it is the captured servant girl who tells her mistress that there is a prophet in Israel (Samaria actually) who can heal Commander Naaman. Moreover, it is Naaman's servants who persuade him to try the simple solution that Elisha offers instead of riding away in a huff. The servants were seekers, holding up an alternative vision of how healing happens.

New Testament Lection

In the Lukan account, Jesus sends his disciples out on their first missionary venture, filling in (Luke says) here he himself intended to go. They are to travel without cloak, staff or sandals. They are to stay with whoever welcomes them instead of searching for the strategic contact. They are to eat whatever is offered and, most important, not get inflated over their spiritual power to heal and cast out demons.

The temptations in this text are also clear. Jesus warns against self-sufficiency and what we might call "market positioning." I think he is holding up the Sabbath tradition, which was part of their heritage. During the Exodus, God provided manna for each day and a double portion on the Sabbath. There was enough for each family but nothing was to be stored. This radical message is also part of our tradition. It is what I call "practicing detachment" from the cultural message that we must provide for ourselves...and leave the poor without care.

Both of these biblical stories describe the temptations that we still wrestle with and they hold up an alternative worldview that Luke calls the "kingdom of heaven" or the realm of God. Both stories suggest the realm of God is here and now, experienced in the flesh with practical consequences. I would

summarize the guidance from these texts as practicing **Sabbath**, **Simplicity** and **Silence**.

Sabbath

Practicing Sabbath does not mean a legalistic regard for not working on Sunday. Rather it refers to the whole tradition of trusting God for what is enough...and acting accordingly. That is what Elisha told Naaman to do and what Jesus recommended to his disciples as they moved into mission with their nascent spiritual gifts.

(Hold up offering plate) Each week, we practice Sabbath when we put money in the offering plate...when our culture tells us we should be socking it away in a retirement fund or buying long-term healthcare insurance. When we give, we not only express gratitude but we practice trusting God for the manna that will sustain us tomorrow.

Another way to practice Sabbath is something that Gordon Cosby described to Kate, Peter and Keith when they went to speak with him about the way Church of the Saviour has financed its missions over the years. Gordon described the Jubilee Loan Fund as an open-ended fund with low quarterly interest payments in which both rich and poor can participate. I remember talking with Beulah Rivers, who has been a fixture at the Potters House for years, about her loan to the Jubilee Fund. She financed it by selling rummage off the fence at Sarah's Circle...because she knew that she could get the money out whenever she really needed it. I think that is a way we could finance ministry out of the Carroll Street building without making money the focus of our efforts there. However, it will only succeed if we practice detachment from our cultural addiction to buying what we want instead of taking

only what we need. During August, Learners & Teachers will be offering a series of Tuesday night classes on money as a spiritual matter and I hope you will plan to come.

Simplicity

The simplicity of Elisha's guidance to Naaman was clearly an affront to this military commander who was used to difficult situations and demanding trials. It flies in the face of our technological solutions as well. "Go wash in the river seven times" is a metaphor of baptism, of new life. Naaman's skin became clear like a baby's the text says. Moreover, Jesus sent his disciples out without extra stuff, naked in their need for help we might say.

There is something about going empty-handed that seems to invite God's presence. Getting rid of the clutter, both inside and out, makes space for God. I am not a good example to follow, because we live in a house full of stuff—too much of almost everything. Nevertheless, this past week, Peter and I went to Bellingham, Washington, to camp in our empty house and seek guidance about what to do with it. I loved the space without furniture and the time without a phone; no computer; no preconceptions. Each of us took a sleeping bag and a few clothes—a little more than the disciples took, but not much.

The simplicity of that space gave rise to new energy and new images. I worked in the yard and came across the scraggly remains of a rose bush that I planted the year I lived in Bellingham while Peter was in Vietnam. One of the ways I made every place—no matter how temporary it was—into our permanent home was to plant a rosebush there. It became a symbol for being present, fully in that place, without needing to own it or control it.

It is something we need to look at more closely here at Seekers. I frankly do not think we are going to experience a great outpouring of new energy when we get to Carroll Street. It is all here, right now. We have to be about the work of “washing seven times in the Jordan” to discover the new life that is in us **now**. That is the deeper meaning of simplicity and Sabbath.

Silence

The third way of practicing detachment from our consumer culture is silence. Regular retreat from the voices that seek to sell us substitutes for what the realm of God really is.

Two weeks ago, Kate Amoss preached about the prophet Elijah, who discovered the “still small voice” of God after a mighty wind and fire had passed. He did not expect to find God in the silence, but he did. He did not like what he heard either, but he obeyed.

Silence will stretch us beyond the answers we already have. The tradition of silence and waiting for the Spirit to speak is part of our Church of the Saviour heritage. Not long ago, some of us gathered to discuss the importance of silent retreat. We challenged ourselves to consider dropping it from the Steward’s commitment—and to a person, agreed that silent retreat was essential to a community that cares about listening for God’s guidance and revelation. We agreed that silence anchored us in God’s *kairos* realm and, like Elisha’s guidance to Naaman, it is free, simple and accessible to all. Silence can help us be suspicious of answers that depend on power and influence.

Sabbath, simplicity and silence – these three – help us practice detachment from the anxious worries that our culture compounds. I am **not** saying that we should not plan for the future or save something for care when we cannot work any more. Nevertheless, **I am saying** that the realm of God is very near to us and if we are going to be seekers who can call forth the gifts of prophetic imagination in our midst then we will have to practice detachment from the substitutes and claim the truth of another way. Amen.