

“Preparing for God’s Kingdom”

by Dave Lloyd

July 8, 2013

The 7th Sunday after Pentecost

Every time I read this story of Naaman and Elisha I remember a clown skit we did years ago. For those of you who have joined us recently, we once had an active clown troupe that from time to time would act out the scriptures in worship. When the story of Naaman was in our lection, Doug Dodge and Mary Carol’s late husband Alan begged us to act it out because they had always wanted to do a clown skit with a medical operation, you know, the one where the clown surgeon keeps pulling all kinds of odd things from the body of the patient, who awakes and periodically needs anesthetizing by being bopped on the head. In the skit Marjory Bankson portrayed the slave-girl as a cleaning lady who was mopping up the floor during the operation, repeatedly saying, “You don’t need all that. All you need is this water,” as she gestured to a bucket labeled “Living Water.”

I think the story of Namaan could use a little context. Aram was another name for the kingdom of the Aramean people based in Damascus. The relationship between the Arameans and the northern and southern kingdoms of the Jews, Israel and Judah, was at best uneasy. Arameans had been allies and then subjects of King David, had gained independence and been rivals of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and had been hired by each kingdom to attack the other kingdom.

Naaman was the commander in chief of Aram’s army. His leprosy was a skin condition that could have been leprosy or any of a

number of skin conditions for which the ancient Mediterranean world had no cure. Both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament gospels emphasize that lepers were generally required to keep separate from others and to warn healthy people not to come too close. How humiliating, how stigmatizing! Have we advanced beyond the attitudes of biblical times or the third world? I've seen people's reactions to lepers in Ethiopia. Here at home, remember how frightened we all were of people who had AIDS when it was first identified?

Aren't we like Naaman? Doesn't each of us have at least one thing that keeps us from being all that we aspire to be and in God's vision for us – something in our physical or mental health, or something in our appearance, or something in our intellectual capacity, or something in our personality, or something in our habits, or some experience in our past, or some fear? Doesn't something hold us back? Don't we all need God's healing?

We don't know why the little slave girl spoke up to Naaman's wife with an idea to cure him. Maybe it was because she grew to develop a loyalty to her mistress or because Naaman had treated her fairly, or because she didn't want to be associated with a family in which there was leprosy, lest it be communicable, or maybe it was because of something else, or maybe it was some combination of these. Her motive isn't important to the biblical story. The advancement of God's kingdom doesn't depend upon important people, perfect people, or spiritual people with pure motives. God uses unimportant people, like a little slave-girl in exile from her homeland. This is outside the box our culture puts God in.

We don't know whether Naaman was immediately open to the idea of going to Elisha or whether his wife had to nag him to consider it – he was a guy after all! – but if it was the latter why should we be surprised if he hesitated? He had a fearsome reputation in Israel and now he would have to go

there as a leper. Don't we sometimes see that there might be a way to remove whatever the stumbling block is to our growth but we might have to swallow our pride to make that happen?

It's not clear why the king of Aram wrote a letter for Naaman to take to the king of Israel. Maybe Naaman's entry into Israel might be mistaken as another raid so he needed a letter of safe passage. Maybe he assumed that the king of Israel controlled Elisha. Maybe he wanted to use this as an excuse to bind the king of Israel closer into an alliance. It doesn't matter. Throughout the Bible God uses people and their actions for God's own purposes.

Naaman delivered the letter along with some pretty sizeable gifts to the king of Israel. It's not clear whether the gifts were from him or from the king of Aram. We don't know whether he thought to bribe the king of Israel and/or Elisha or whether he had faith that he would be cured and wanted to show his gratitude. Again, it doesn't matter. The important thing is that he went at all.

The king of Israel had less hope and faith than Naaman did. He thought he was being set up as an excuse for Damascus to attack again. I can relate to the king of Israel all too easily. Sharon is always having to remind me to be positive, to see the glass as half full rather than half-empty, to look at an idea's potential rather than immediately see its flaws, to have faith rather than quickly to suspect that things won't turn out as well as we'd hope. If it was up to me, God's kingdom probably wouldn't advance very far.

Fortunately, God doesn't rely solely on me and God didn't rely on the king of Israel either. But Elisha didn't come out of his house to Naaman and maybe a leper wouldn't have expected Elisha to. Elisha merely sent a messenger to tell Naaman to wash himself in the Jordan River seven times. Naaman regarded this as another humiliation; it would be like an American general expecting to be told to bathe in the Mississippi River

but being told to bathe in Sligo Creek. I am right there with Naaman on this. On more than one occasion I have worked myself up with tension and more than a little fear about some problem until I view it as a predicament that will require a great deal of time and effort, only to be embarrassed when I find out how easily the problem can actually be solved. I can see Naaman shaking his head in disgust and muttering as he went and washed himself seven times in the Jordan River.

Naaman couldn't heal himself, nor could the priests and prophets of Naaman's own culture, nor could either of the kings of the two countries. Naaman's healing depended first upon being willing to listen to his wife's slave-girl, then to Elisha's messenger, and then to his own servants. His healing depended upon listening to those who don't seem to have power, at least as the world measures it. Do I understand that my own healing is dependent upon my listening to what those without power are telling me? Elisha didn't do a hands-on cure the way Jesus did. He merely gave Naaman a task and it was up to Naaman to decide whether to accept it or not. Do I understand that my healing may depend upon my choice whether or not to do simple things, things that strike at my pride?

The lection leaves out part of Naaman's story. After being healed, Naaman acknowledges that the God of Israel is the only god, thanks Elisha and unsuccessfully tries to offer him gifts. He takes two mule-loads of earth from Israel back to Damascus so that he may build an altar to and worship only the God of Israel. And here is the part I love. Naaman can't bring himself to give up his job and he knows that will require him to compromise his new faith. He asks forgiveness in advance for having to go with his master to worship at a pagan temple. Elisha bade him farewell. It is comforting to me to know that when I feel I have to sin against God and you and everyone else, and I have sinned and do sin and will sin, I can ask for forgiveness.

Jews living in the time of Elisha might well have been aghast

at this story. Naaman was not only a Gentile but a Gentile who had done harm to God's people. He deserved leprosy! Why would God offer healing to him? What was the servant-girl thinking? Of course God was God over all other Gods, the God of the universe, but didn't she know that God had selected the children of Abraham to be God's people? God might intervene in the lives of Gentiles to save Jews, but would God intervene to heal Gentiles without it leading directly to the saving of Jews? That is SO outside of the box. That is not justice! Naaman's washing himself in the Jordan seven times could only be viewed as a form of baptism. Why would Elisha want this Gentile to be baptized? Where was Naaman's repentance? Where were his acts of atonement? What kind of God is this? This whole story is SO outside of the box of our thinking.

In today's gospel Jesus sent disciples out in pairs to the towns he was going to visit en route to Jerusalem. None of them was seminary trained and it doesn't appear that he gave them any special training. They either understood this new way of living by following him or they didn't. It doesn't appear that any of them had any special gifts of preaching. They were nothing special – in that regard they were like the slave-girl in Naaman's household and like his servants. Jesus gave them a task, to heal those whom they found that needed it and to proclaim that the kingdom of God had come close to them. They were not to withhold healing from those who had done evil and they were not to put stumbling blocks to healing in the paths of those they encountered. God's healing love was to be shared with everyone, saint and sinner alike. I imagine that the disciples' reaction to these instructions might have been puzzlement. Why heal enemies? Why heal sinners? Jesus went on to say that if they were not welcomed, they were not to proclaim judgment upon the town but merely to have nothing to do with it further, wiping off even the dust of the town from their feet. I can imagine at least one or two of the 70 or 72 grumbling, why not? Let us bring God's justice down on them! Jesus' way is SO outside of the box we want to put it in.

We too are called to live outside of the box, to proclaim to everyone we encounter the good news that the kingdom of God is close. We may be better prepared than the disciples were because we know the end of the story, that God has forgiven all of us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. How are we to proclaim the imminence of the kingdom of God, to offer healing? The truly good news is that we do this through the gifts God has given each of us. Some people in this room can explain the theology behind the kingdom of God to those who have questions. Some have the gift of preaching, some have the gift of teaching. Others have the gift of helping people visualize the kingdom of God in metaphor through art or poetry or music or theatre or photography or quilting or cooking or raising a garden. Some have the gift of healing through simple presence or through massage or counselling. Some offer the gift of hospitality to those who visit us and some make those who are homeless feel remembered and loved. Some offer a helping hand to families when they have difficulties, offering time and transportation, and money. Some have the gift of digging ditches and bending rebar in Guatemala. Some advocate politically for justice. Some, like our servant leadership team, offer themselves by making available huge portions of their daily lives, taking on tough assignments and risking being misunderstood and even insulted.

Last week Deborah Sokolove reminded us that

every day brings new opportunities to practice the ongoing self-examination of our motives as well as our actions, to surrender our selfishness to the will of God, to become free to live in the unpredictability of the Spirit. What have I done today to help someone? What did I do today that harmed someone? What can I do to make things better? How can I contribute to the healing of the world?

Those sound to me like questions the disciples who had been sent out might have asked themselves each day. We are not

instructed to demand that those we encounter repent and change their ways and be baptized. Indeed, in a few moments we will invite you to share in these elements of Jesus' last supper with his disciples, the elements by which we can truly commune with each other, the elements by which we can model the kingdom of God. In this local expression of the Body of Christ we offer communion, the Eucharist, to everyone, member and visitor, old and young, baptized and unbaptized, saint and sinner. We embody the vision of living outside of the box.

The kingdom of God is close. Allelujah. The kingdom of God is here. Allelujah.

I unreservedly and with abandon commit my life and destiny to Christ, – See more at:
http://wp.theoblogical.org/?page_id=3750#sthash.4WB0Xabz.dpuf
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