

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

II Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20; Galatians 6:(1-6) 7-16

II Kings 5:1-14 is the powerful story of the healing from leprosy of Naaman, the commander of the army of Aram. The skin disease that Naaman had was likely not Hansen's disease, but a non-infectious skin disease such as psoriasis. We can assume that was the case because Naaman was still active in court and on the battlefield, which would not have been true if he had Hansen's disease (a number of skin diseases were labeled as "leprosy" in the Old Testament era).

The story is centered on the reaction and response of a number of pivotal characters within the story. The first, of course, is Naaman himself. The second is the Israelite slave girl. The third are the two kings – Ben-hadad of Syria and Jehoram of Israel. And the fourth, of course, is Elisha the prophet.

The unnamed slave girl suggests to Naaman's wife that he could be healed by going to the prophet Elisha in Israel. Naaman seeks permission of his king to do so. Ben-hadad, supposing Elisha to be a court-prophet of King Jehoram of Israel, sends his commander to the king both with a letter requesting his healing and a significant payment for his services (150 pounds of gold and 750 pounds of silver). King Jehoram sees the letter as a ruse for bringing about hostility and even a state of war between the two nations (because he can't fulfill the demand), and so despairs of what to do. Elisha, hearing of this matter, sends to Jehoram to send Naaman to him.

When Naaman arrives at Elisha's house, the prophet doesn't even assume the courtesy of meeting with the commander face-to-face. Instead, he tells him to bathe seven times in the Jordan River. Taking umbrage at this instruction, Naaman states that if this was the way that a man of his importance was to be treated, he might as well simply have stayed home. But Naaman's servants talk sense to him; he immerses himself as instructed in the Jordan River seven times, and is miraculously healed. "His flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean" (vs. 14).

That's the story. But there is much occurring behind the story, because this is really a story about both power and the spirituality that lies behind its use and abuse.

Naaman is both a picture of power and of powerlessness. He is the commander of the army of Syria and confidant to its king – so he is likely the second most powerful person in the land. But, on the other hand, he has a serious skin disease that makes others recoil from him – so he is likely a very vulnerable man. It is a powerless slave girl, captured from a raid the army of Syria had made upon Israel who, rather than being resentful and vindictive against her captor, allows her heart to be broken with his plight and intervenes to suggest relief and even healing. The king of Syria seeks to use both his political cache and economic power to persuade the king of Israel to provide healing for his commander; thus, he is coming as supplicant to King Jehoram, but with an implied threat if Jehoram does not deliver on Ben-hadad's request. A person of no economic or political consequence in the kingdom except for his prophetic powers, Elisha must come to Jehoram's rescue in order to deliver him from an unnegotiable dilemma. But Elisha, in not meeting Naaman face-to-face, acts in a way that is insulting to this visiting dignitary and, in essence, puts him in his place. Naaman takes umbrage at both his treatment and in Elisha's

prescription of a cure. But it is the powerless servants of Naaman that intervene in the situation, speaking truth and sense to the commander. Happily, he listens to them, takes the cure that Elisha had prescribed to him, and is made whole.

Throughout this story, it is the powerless who act powerfully and who bring liberation and transformation to the situation. It is the powerful that are repeatedly made powerless, so that they recognize that their dependence lies with God (in fact, vs. 15 tells us that Naaman becomes a believer in Yahweh as a result of this incident). Thus, there is throughout this story, a continual reversal of roles, as the powerful discover the limitations of their power and the powerless discover how profoundly they can change the world around them! And it is all because the God of power, Yahweh, works through the powerless to both humble and transform the powerful.

And that brings us to the most important statement in this entire event. This story begins with the words, “Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram” (5:1). Aram (Syria) was not a great and influential nation in the Middle East because of its military, political or economic power. It was great because “the Lord had given victory to Aram”. This enemy of Israel was victorious, even over Israel, because of God’s intervention. Yahweh was in control of the history of pagan nations as well as Israel; consequently, it was God who made Naaman and Ben-hadad great, just as he made King Jehoram great. And it was God who gave to his prophet Elisha, to Naaman’s servants and even to a little slave girl the capacity to greatly influence the powerful and to change the course of history. For it was “the Lord (who) had given victory”.

The story ends as it began, with a similar assertion. Although this Sunday’s lectionary ends with verse 14, the story itself continues into verse 15. “Then Naaman returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel.” Naaman is won over to Yahweh, leaving his worship of Rimmon (Ba’al) behind (except for some political expediency – vs. 18). So now, even Naaman knows that it was “the Lord (who) had given victory to Aram”. Even Naaman now discovers that it is Yahweh who orders the life of every nation (and not just the nation where Yahweh dwells – Israel). For it is that same God who had humbled the powerful, empowered the powerless, and brought about his healing – not just of his leprosy, but also of his arrogance and ego. Thus, this story tells us that all the power lies in this Yahweh and through the servants of Yahweh (even a little slave girl) throughout the world, and not through the military, political or economic “powers” of the world!

Psalm 30 is apparently occasioned by the recovery of the Psalmist from a grave illness. The Psalmist centers on the praise of God for rescuing him from that sickness. It is a psalm with several well-known lines and metaphors.

“Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night; but joy comes with the morning” (30:4-5).

Or, again,

“You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever” (vss. 11-12).

These are popular and very vivid phrases. But behind their drama lies a very profound truth – that God is at work in our lives and in our circumstances, and acts in ways that can bring triumph out of defeat, joy out of bitterness, health out of sickness. It is important that we perceive that such healing and deliverance is the action of God, and not just circumstance.

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20 tells us that Jesus appointed seventy (72? – see below) followers to go out in pairs into “every town and place where he himself intended to go”. His instruction to them is “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves” (10:2-3).

Jesus tells them to make their living off the land (the same policy followed by the Roman army, so that they didn’t have to sustain long supply lines). Accept the hospitality offered to you, and be content with it. Cure the sick, heal the lame, carry on Jesus’ ministry among the people, and proclaim to them that the kingdom of God has come near to them. “Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you” (vs. 5). Some will embrace what you say and will desire to follow Jesus. Others will reject it. No matter! Proclaim the truth anyway. And whether they accept or reject, it is they who must accept the consequences of their own response.

So, the seventy are sent forth, carry out their mission and return, full of enthusiasm and excitement at how well their mission has gone for them. And Jesus responds to their enthusiasm, “I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (vss. 18-20).

This story has been written by Luke in order for it to carry a double meaning. The first meaning is its literal meaning; it is about the disciples being sent out by Jesus to extend Jesus’ ministry beyond Jesus himself. It was following the practices of many of Israel’s prophets and rabbis in which they would build a coterie of disciples around themselves who, having sat at the master’s feet and learned from him, then carried his message out to the world around them, thereby greatly expanding the work and words of their masters.

But there is a second meaning in this story as well. That second meaning is made clear by the fact that some texts cite the number of sent-out followers as being seventy, and other texts as seventy-two. The numbers are not haphazard, but are carefully chosen. Genesis 10 numbers the total of the nations in the world as seventy (in the Hebrew Bible) or seventy-two (as numbered in the Greek translations of the Bible). Therefore, by the very fact that translators of the Gospel of

Luke used either the number 70 or 72 indicates that they understood that this story is about Jesus sending out his church into all the nations of the world (the translator conforming the text to the biblical number he supported as the number of nations in the world). This story is meant by Luke to presage the book of Acts; it is a forerunner of what is to come!

The mission of the church, Jesus tells his disciples, is to be a mission of conflict. Some will hear the good news gladly, but others will be enraged and threatened by it. Christians will be “lambs among wolves”. Authentic Christians will be in conflict with the people, with the political, economic and religious systems that order the life of each society in which Christians act out their faith, and will even be in conflict with cosmic forces. But your task, as disciples of Christ, is to simply act out and bring the gospel of shalom to the world into which you are reaching. Those who are people of shalom themselves – people to whom a politics of justice, a religion of relational love and an economics of sharing is good news – will respond with shalom and your shalom should rest on them. Those who are not people of shalom but rather are committed to control, manipulation and using the situation for their own profit, will reject such an offer of shalom. And your response to them must be to shake their dust off your feet!

The dominant emphasis in this passage, however, is not on the mission of the seventy (72). It is on their attitude. The larger section on the formation of the disciples (9:1—10:24) ends with a more humbled, subdued disciple band being sent out to and returning from mission. It has been demonstrated to them, again and again, how dependent they are and must be upon the fostering of a dynamic relationship with Jesus. They can accomplish little in their own strength, however apparently great their talents or skills may be. But they can accomplish much by being centered in him, drawing both their strength and their vision from God. They must not center on the success of their deeds, nor their skills, nor their relationships within the Church. They cannot thrive as “Christ-ones” on the power, prestige, possessions or parochialisms of the world. They can thrive in mission only by giving themselves away in and to Christ.

Jesus then ends this segment of reflection on God’s call to his followers with this instruction: “Do not rejoice at (your success in ministry which causes) “Satan (to) fall from heaven” or “that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (10:20). Rejoice that God has seen fit to graciously call you into his kingdom. Rejoice that Christ wants you as a disciple, and is willing to bring you under discipline to mold you into his faithful follower. Rejoice that your name has been written into the Lamb’s Book of Life. That is where your emphasis as disciples and Christians should be – not on your success!

Galatians 6:7-16 concludes Paul’s letter to the Christian churches in the province of Galatia. Verses 7-10 summarize his primary argument, stating that the priorities of one’s life will have its inevitable impact upon that life. “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” (vs. 8). By “flesh”, Paul likely means the claiming of obedience to the Law as the way of guaranteeing one’s salvation (manifested through the rite of circumcision). By “Spirit”, he likely means resting one’s salvation upon the grace of God, which is received by us. Of course, by using the word “flesh” to describe obedience to the Law, Paul is obviously creating a double entendre, for the manifestation of embracing the Law is circumcision – the cutting of “flesh”.

We will reap what we sow, Paul is declaring. If we place our confidence in the Law, we will discover some day that it will not provide for us the salvation we seek. If we place our confidence in the saving work of Jesus Christ, we will discover some day that it will give us the salvation we want so badly.

But does depending upon God's grace and not the Law result in a "workless" Christianity, a faith that simply receives and is quiescent? Quite to the contrary, Paul argues. It is precisely because of the freely given love and grace of God that we are motivated, in gratitude, to freely give and love! To be grace-filled inevitably results in being grace-distributive. It will be our nature, as people transformed by the love of God, to "not grow weary in doing what is right". Our life is now to be centered on "not giving up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all – and especially for those of the family of faith" (vss. 9b-10).

Paul then moves to a summary of his entire letter (6:11-16). In order to accentuate the importance of this closing summary, Paul takes over from his scribe and writes the close in his own hand. And because his eyesight is likely very poor, those words are written large and shaking (cf. 4:15; I Cor. 16:21; Col. 4:18; II Thess. 3:17). But what he writes is of such importance to Paul that, even though he is ashamed of his handwriting that displays his own poor health, he writes his own conclusion anyway.

"It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised – only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the Law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. Well, may I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! As for those who will follow this rule – peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God" (vss. 12-16).

There are those, Paul argues, who simply want "to make a good showing", and so they will try to convince you that you should be circumcised as a sign that you depend upon obedience to the Law for your salvation. That will make the Jewish authorities happy (because they are winning converts to Moses), and it will protect from persecution those "Christians" who teach the Law as salvation. Further, accepting acquiescence to the Law and, consequently, circumcision as a sign of your trust in salvation in the Law, brings you under the protection of Rome.

How would it bring one under Rome's protection? Well, Rome required all nations and all religions to recognize Caesar as a god. The only religion and nation that Rome excused from this recognition was the Jews because Rome recognized that, because of Jewish monotheism, the Jews would to a man die rather than worship Caesar. So Rome made exception only for Judaism and at the same time brought Judaism under their protection. Therefore, for a Christian to embrace Judaism was to embrace the protection of Rome. But if they did not, then Christians would be considered "atheists" (i.e., people who didn't recognize the divinity of the Caesar) and would be subject to persecution (in fact, this was exactly what Christians were persecuted for in the 2nd through 4th centuries by Rome).

So it is, Paul points out, that to accede to the demands for conversion to Judaism made by “Christian” Judaizers is for the Christian to make a terrible concession. You will have risked your salvation with God by freely accepting Roman dominance. And you will have been welcomed by so-called Jewish Christians who really are not that interested in your welfare as much as they are interested in maintaining good relationships with the Jewish establishment. These people simply want your spiritual scalps to hang from their “soul-savers scalp belt”, so that they can boast of their accomplishments and win favor with the Jewish priesthood. You, as a person, aren’t important to them. It is getting credit for your conversion to Judaism that is important to them.

But, Paul continues, “may I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ”. If one is centered in the sacrifice that Jesus made for the transformation of the world, then what people think of you, or the credit or fame you receive means nothing to you. Even losing the protection of Roman law is worth the danger into which you put yourself. Centering in Jesus’ sacrifice causes you to die to the standards and priorities of the world (it really isn’t important how much money you make or recognition you receive or influence or protection you have). All that matters is the new creation of people, the systems of society and the world itself that comes through aligning oneself with God’s intentions for the world.

So nothing bothers me anymore, Paul in essence states. There is no longer anything attractive about the praise of people, being well thought of, or being influential, powerful, wealthy or protected. That’s all emptiness, now. I will only boast of the great sacrifice God paid for humanity in the death of his Son that came out of the immense love God has for us, and the value God places on us. And because of such sacrificial love on God’s part, I want to stake my claim to that God and join my Lord and Savior in working for God’s kingdom. So nothing bothers me anymore. And I want nothing more out of life than that. And for all those other people who feel the way I feel, I wish them, “Peace be upon them, and mercy” for they are the authentic “Israel of God”.

That same clarity and peace with one’s circumstances, and the rightness of one’s cause was captured by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the final speech of his life as he supported striking sanitation workers in Memphis. He concluded that speech in much the same way as Paul concluded his letter to the churches in Galatia, with the words, “Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter with me now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. So I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. For mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!”¹

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¹ Martin Luther King Jr., “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop”, April 3, 1968, found at <http://www.thatsalabama.com/speeches/mlkjr/mountaintopindex.html>.