

Eighteenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/C): “No ‘Them’ in God’s Vocabulary”

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c, Luke 17:11-19

October 8-9, 2022

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

What’s the silliest thing anyone has ever asked you to do?

I wish I had a hilarious story to tell, but I just have garden variety examples like wearing my pajamas to Confirmation class on Pajama Night at my 1st call church in Mundelein, Illinois. In retrospect, bobbing for apples was pretty silly, too. (Blast from the past: less germ-conscious days ☺.) Speaking of Halloween, though, when I used to follow Kristiane around town as she trick-or-treated, I wore a kangaroo costume my mom Mimi made for me. It has a pouch, of course, but I don’t have a stuffed joey (baby kangaroo), so I’ve always put a stuffed bunny rabbit in the pouch instead. It’s very silly, but also very fun, and not something imposed on me by anyone else.

Not so with Naaman, the Syrian general in today’s first lesson. He is **not** amused when he’s told to do something that sounds ridiculous to him: jumping into the River Jordan and bobbing up and down 7 times. He’s a general, for Heaven’s sake! Why would he engage in such foolishness? He’s looking for a cure for his leprosy, not looking to take a quick dip, in a **foreign** river, no less.

We hear leprosy and we think of advanced symptoms of what is now called Hansen’s Disease. We picture decaying skin, fingers and toes and maybe a nose falling off. But a diagnosis of “leprosy” in Old & New Testament times was a **really** big umbrella that covered **lots** of skin ailments, including problems like psoriasis. The lepers in today’s Gospel are obviously in much worse shape than the general, even though they lived about 800 years later.... He’s still commanding an army and living with his wife in his own home. They’re probably living **outside** their village, **apart** from family members, and we’re told they are “keeping their distance” from Jesus because the Book of Deuteronomy commands them to; it devotes two whole chapters to how to act toward lepers and how to behave if you are one. Fear of contagion was so great that the rule of thumb in Jesus’ time was this: if you see a leper and the wind is blowing from his or her direction, stay at least 50 yards (1/2 a football field) away.

Back to Naaman. His flesh isn't rotting away but he's got a significant skin ailment that causes discomfort, pain, embarrassment, worry. As a general he is a man of means and must have sought out medical help, but he hasn't gotten any relief. A new lead, a reason for him to hope, comes to him through an unusual channel: his wife's handmaid, an enslaved Israelite girl.

Now remember, Naaman is from Aram, modern-day Syria; he isn't a Jew. Naaman has led his army in battle **against** Israel; his soldiers won; they took captives; the girl who ends up serving Naaman's wife is one of the captured Israelite children. Did you notice, did you scratch your head about this interesting news note at the beginning of this lesson from 2 Kings?

*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.** (2Kings 5:1a)*

Whadya mean, the LORD gave victory to **Aram**? Aram was Israel's enemy. God was fighting for the **other** side?? Well, God **does** write straight with crooked lines.... God frequently does the unexpected. And maybe we shouldn't be so cocksure that God is on just one side; we're all God's children, after all.

'Can't help but think of the anecdote about the clergyman attending a reception in the White House celebrating a Union victory during the Civil War. The preacher addresses Mr. Lincoln, gushing, "Mr. President, isn't it great that God is on our side??" And Mr. Lincoln quietly responds, "Reverend, I just pray that we are on God's side."

We don't know why the slave girl shares the information with her mistress about the prophet Elisha's ability to heal. Maybe she thinks she'll get better treatment for offering helpful advice to the wife; maybe she feels compassion for the general. In any case, Naaman follows up immediately and asks his Syrian king for a letter of introduction to the king of Israel, who reacts with **fear** and **suspicion**. The king of Israel thinks **he** is expected to perform the healing! He knows he's incapable. He starts to imagine a conspiracy, to believe that the king of Aram is setting him up for failure, and will then declare war. (Talk about catastrophic thinking....) Thankfully Elisha catches word of this and sends a message to the king

asking that the king send Naaman his way. (Elisha may have wanted to add, “It’s not always all about **you**, you know!”)

Naaman proceeds to Elisha’s house and stands outside with his entourage of soldiers and horses. I don’t know if he doesn’t enter out of courtesy or out of disdain, but in either case Elisha doesn’t come out. Instead he sends a servant to say that his prescription to cure Naaman’s leprosy is that the general should wash 7 times in the Jordan River. As we already mentioned, the general thinks that’s ridiculous and leaves “*in a rage.*” (2 Kings 5:12c) But just as it was the “underling,” the **slave girl**, who passed along important info about Elisha’s power to heal, so it is the general’s subordinates, his **servants**, who talk sense into him. Basically: “You would have gone to the moon and back to be cured of this affliction, but you won’t go down to the river? You would have climbed Mt. Everest but you’re too proud to do something close by and much less strenuous?” We don’t want to miss that in this story it’s the “little ones,” the ones of no consequence, the usually invisible ones, who help save the day. So let’s ask the Holy Spirit to open our ears to wisdom coming from directions we least expect and might be tempted to ignore.

Most importantly, though, let’s recognize that it’s those branded **outsiders** in both the first reading and the Gospel, the foreign general Naaman and the anonymous Samaritan leper, who receive the gift of faith and praise the God of Israel! These stories from Scripture emphasize **universalism**, the fancy word for God’s love of **all** people. Early in St. Luke’s Gospel Jesus aggravates His fellow folks from Nazareth, because when He’s preaching in his hometown synagogue He reminds them:

²⁷“There were... many with a skin disease in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” (Luke 4)

They didn’t want to hear that God’s favor extended beyond the chosen people of Israel. “Mine! All mine!” “Ours! All ours!” But both these stories preach God’s love, God’s grace, flowing in unexpected directions, blessing unexpected people, **outsiders** considered spiritually and ethnically “less than.” God went to bat

for the Syrian army. God went to bat for the Syrian general. God goes to bat through Jesus for a **Samaritan leper**, a double pariah if there ever was one.

Luther was big on the importance of being able to say, God is *pro me*, meaning *for me*. “*To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior....*” “**For me** is born this day in the city of David a Savior....” “*This is my body, this is my blood, given for you....*” “*This is Christ’s body, this is Christ’s blood, given **for me**....*” We need to joyfully profess, “Christ for me!” “Christ for us!” But we also need to acknowledge, “Christ for them!” Whoever “them” happens to be. **In God’s language, there is no “them” – only a beloved “you.”** “All of you.” “All of you, My children.” The mistress and the slave girl, the Syrian king and general, the general’s servants, the Israelite king and prophet, the 9 Jewish lepers and the 1 Samaritan leper: “You, all of you; all of you, My beloved children.” Maybe you’re familiar with Edwin Markham’s poem:

“He drew a circle that shut me out-
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. [“Leper!!”]
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took him In!”¹ [Not “leper”: child of God!]

That’s what God has done: God has drawn a circle of love and taken us all in. There’s no voting anyone off of this island. It’s God’s space and there’s a welcome for all. To those who come, may we embody the message on the little outdoor garden flags you may have seen as you came in: “This is Christ’s church. There is a place for you here.” Amen

¹goodreads.com.

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