



Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Sharmain James



Sunday 3 July 2022

READINGS

2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6:1-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Finding Hospitality among the in-significant of society

Prayer: Loving God We pray that through the power of the Holy Spirit we hear afresh Your word to us, calling us to take the good news to all the world. May I speak to you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

I found today's readings of the healing of Naaman from the book of 2nd Kings, and the sending of the seventy from Luke's Gospel – an odd pairing of stories. At first glance, it's hard to understand why. What do these two stories have in common? What does a military commander's healing in the Jordan River have to do with Jesus' commissioning seventy disciples to share the Gospel? Let's see how these two stories are connected and what they can teach us.

In our gospel reading – Jesus sends out the seventy, much as the twelve were sent out earlier. "Why seventy?" you might ask. No one knows for sure, but the assumption is that in Genesis 10, the seventy nations of the world are named, and therefore Jesus sent out seventy to symbolize the sending of the message to all the known world.

The instructions are very much the same as those given to the twelve (Luke 9). First Jesus sent them out in pairs - to go ahead of him, proclaiming the kingdom and healing to all people. The seventy are told to take no luggage and to get going without delay. Jesus says that their mission will be a dangerous one. They will be like lambs among wolves. He warns them that some people will not receive them well, and they will have to dust off their bruised egos and keep going. He advises them to be gracious guests, eating whatever is put before them (even if it is Brussel sprouts).

But then - our gospel passage jumps over the mission of the seventy and simply says, "The seventy returned with joy." Luke doesn't give us any details of their mission experience. We do not get to hear what food was put before them is. We do not get to hear how scary traveling with no money or shoes is. We do not even get to hear how many times they have to dust off their feet in protest from ill treatment. No, the story just goes straight to the end, "The seventy returned with joy." It feels like all the bad stuff is just shoved into fine print so that we do not get a sense of what is really going on out in the mission field -- because, based on what Jesus says, the mission field sounds terrifying.

Feeling frustrated by the lack of detail in our gospel reading - I found myself wondering how we might get a glimpse into the real experience of following Jesus and sharing the good news. The lectionary invites us to go back to the story of Naaman - and to realized perhaps he is the key. The more I reflected on Naaman - the clearer it became that Naaman has much more in common with the followers of Jesus – in fact, more in common with us – than we might imagine.

We know from our Old Testament reading that Naaman – whose name means “Pleasant” is described as the mighty commander of the army of Syria. Because of the Lord’s favour, Naaman has led the king’s troops to victory. Naaman is NOT one of the Israelites, but he is someone with great power – The reading also tells us he was great, honourable, victorious, brave, fearless, a hero and wealthy. Until we read the last few words in verse 1, “BUT HE HAD LEPROSY”.

He has longed for healing and would use his power, and influence, and money if he could. But so far that has not led to success. Instead, Naaman has to go another way. As it turns out, Naaman has to go on a journey that is very similar in conditions to what the seventy in our gospel reading must do. In order to find healing and wholeness, Naaman must give up his power, sense of control, and must rely on others – especially those most marginalized in society. Basically, like the seventy, - Naaman must give up his purse, his bag, his sandals, and must rely on the hospitality of others. His story starts with a tip from a slave girl from Israel. She learns of her masters leprosy and suggests he seek out Elisha for healing. He could have ignored her but instead he listened to the wisdom of servants and most remarkably – a young female slave. This may be an indication of how desperate he was to receive help with his condition.

So, Naaman gets a blessing from his king and heads off to the king of Israel. Only, the king of Israel misunderstands Naaman and thinks he is being setup for failure. We are told that he tore his clothes. Elisha hears about it – and gives orders to the king to have Naaman come to him, and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel. So, Naaman is sent to Elisha’s home. He waits at the door for Elisha to come and greet him with the respect that he is due. And he waits. And he waits. And he waits. Eventually, someone comes to the door but it’s not Elisha. It’s someone with a message from Elisha. “Go wash yourself 7 times in the Jordan and your skin will be restored. Instead of dusting his feet off at the insult, Naaman gets angry - an action out of character with the noble qualities by which he is described in verse 1. Even though his healing required only a few dips in the Jordan – Naaman expected something spectacular. From his reaction in verse 11 – Naaman had his own idea of how his cure should be handled. He expected Elisha to come out of his house say a prayer and pass his hands over the leprosy.

Naaman’s unnamed servants calm him down. – they plead with him to do as Elisha orders – and appeal to him to try the remedy anyway. In a role reversal, Naaman does what his servants tells him to do. He eats humble pie and is healed. Naaman gives us a glimpse into the fine print of Jesus’ commissioning of the seventy. Going without a purse, sandals, and relying on the hospitality of others takes a lot of HUMILITY. In a world where power and prestige meant everything, Naaman humbled himself. He puts aside his position so he could find healing. Facing rejection, which Jesus guarantees will come, will take a lot of anger management. Going in his name will mean accepting help from anyone and everyone – not the easiest of tasks for us, who prefer to be self-sufficient, independent. We prefer to be people who help instead of people who need help.

I have read many stories of people who have been on missionary trips and almost all those stories highlight the fact of what an overwhelming honour it is to be invited into the homes and hearts of people who have shown them hospitality. But in order for any of that to happen, we have to make ourselves vulnerable. If we are the ones in need of healing then we have to surrender to the power of God – whose presence rest within people we may deem as insignificant. We have to put ourselves in the position of Naaman to receive aid and healing from the least likely persons.

True mission is not about the powerful and wealthy bringing their resources to the poor and downtrodden. True mission is about the powerful and wealthy realizing their own spiritual poverty and creating an environment where rich and poor, healthy and sick can share healing, wholeness, and health in

a way that recognizes we all have needs before God. Jesus was right to warn us of the possible risks of sharing the good news: vulnerability, insecurity, bodily danger, hurt egos, and long days. Though the seventy do not show us what that it looks like, Naaman certainly does.

STEPHEN REID in his commentary on 2 Kings 5:1-14 says that Naaman reminds us – that even though the side effects may lead to anger, feelings of abandonment, a loss of self-worth and importance. The benefits are still the same: healing and wholeness for the whole community, redefining who is in and who is out of the community, and new purpose in the larger world.

The good news is that part of our preparation involves partners for the journey: Jesus sends the seventy out two-by-two. Even Naaman does not go alone, but takes others with him – others who keep him in check and support him in his sense of loss. And the result is the same: healing and joy. Those kind of results make the side effects worth it!

Amen.