

Pentecost 4C, Proper 9

July 3, 2022

All Saints', Littleton, NH

The Rev. Curtis Metzger

2 Kings 5: 1-14

Psalm 30

Galatians 6: 1-6, 7-16

Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20

This weekend we celebrate our country's birth. We remember how people across the colonies rose to throw off a government that had become oppressive to its people. Though we know the names of the important leaders, there were countless men and women who fought and engaged in daring actions to free the nation. And many others in our long history who labored in simple, quiet ways to make this country better. Their stories are not so well told. Today's lessons help us to focus on faithful service as its own reward....but that it is important to recognize simple efforts by unsung heroes that can change the world – and those unsung heroes should be us!

In the lesson from second Kings we hear the odd story of Naaman, a commander from a rival kingdom, who hears about a holy man in the nation of Israel who might heal him of his leprosy. He hears about him

from his wife who heard about Elisha, the prophet, from a Hebrew slave girl she had who was taken into captivity from a raid. He convinces his king to send him with gifts and a letter of introduction to the king of Israel. There was a long-standing rivalry between Israel and Aram, but the king of Aram relented and sent Naaman. Now this is odd in itself, because I imagine that Naaman had caused a lot of harm to Israel.

When Naaman arrives and is received by the King of Israel, the king thinks this is some kind of ruse to cause a war---who, for heaven's sake can cure the great Naaman of his leprosy. If the king fails, he thinks that the king of Aram will use this as an excuse to invade. However, Elisha gets wind of this and tells the king not to worry, but to send Naaman to him. Naaman comes with his retinue and gifts to Elisha's house, but Elisha doesn't receive him, he just tells him to go and wash in the Jordan 7 times. Naaman takes affront to this and thinks this is rather silly if not demeaning in some way. Heck, he could go wash in some finer rivers in Damascus. Where are the holy words, the mumbo-jumbo, the special things he would have to do, the sacrifices, the magical creams and ointments?!

But, and this is important, some of his servants convince him to why not give it a try; after all, they reason, wouldn't he have done some sort of

herculean task if ordered by the prophet, so why not just do this simple thing. He of course is healed.

Do you see how it was a slave girl in Naaman's house, and other servants of Naaman who were actually the heroes of the story? They are the ones who ultimately pointed to healing and the grace of God. Take note here in this early text, how the God of Israel favors a foreigner who ultimately, is willing to be obedient.....not an Israelite, not one of the circumcision.

In the portion of Paul's letter to the Galatians read this morning we hear some advice about this way of being from a slightly different angle. He says to us to focus on our own work as opposed to judging and critiquing others' work; and that we should be ready to 'bear one another's burdens'. We all fail, we all fall short – be willing to help one another up. As in that phrase in my blessing each week: "strengthen those who fail". And remember, God is not mocked – we will reap what we sow. Therefore live in the Spirit and, one of my favorite verses, " Whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith." While we have the opportunity!!

Finally, Paul picks up his stenographer's pen and writes in his own hand---this is somewhat amusing that this is preserved in the scripture! I can just see Paul...."Give me that pen!, I'm going to drive home an important point in my own hand". At this point Paul returns to a favorite theme: don't listen to those who would resurrect religious law and make you slaves to it. The 'circumcised', he says, don't even follow all the law so what's the point---and it is definitely not something to be proud of! He takes pride, so to speak, in the cross of Christ, and he is the willing slave to the one who showed us the way in ultimate self-offering and love. The point is not outward religiosity or ritual purity, but being a new creation in Christ.

He ends by invoking peace and mercy on those who know this and follow this way....on 'the Israel of God'. What does he mean by that? Well, we who follow are the new nation of Israel---the new Israel of God!

The gospel this morning is the commissioning of the 70 to go out and prepare the way for Jesus. He tells them to take nothing, accept hospitality where it is given, spread the good news, and know that whether you are received or not, "The kingdom of God has come near"!

They do this and come back rejoicing at their success. Jesus rejoices with them, yet he tells them not to rejoice in earthly success, but that their names are written in heaven. Would that more evangelists would really understand this lesson – humble service in the name of Christ...planting seeds and seedlings even if you may never bask in their shade. God knows, and your name is written in heaven.

When I think about this way of being in the world, I don't think of neurotic, self-obsessed politicians grandstanding. I think of humble, quiet service that knows that God is not mocked, and we reap what we sow.

And I think of a deep interior peace that spreads out to the world around you.....like the kind of peace given in the old blessing and benediction: May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his son, Jesus Christ our Lord; and blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be with you now and always.