

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sexagesima

Sunday, February 12, 2012

FIRST READING: 2 Kings 5:1–14

Elisha tells Naaman, a Syrian general, to immerse himself in the Jordan River to be cleansed of his leprosy. Initially refusing to do this humble act, Naaman eventually obeys and is healed, revealing not the magic of the water but the power of Israel's God.

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. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. ²Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." ⁴So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. ⁵And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel."

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. ⁶He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." ⁷When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

⁸But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." ⁹So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. ¹⁰Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." ¹¹But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! ¹²Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. ¹³But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean?'" ¹⁴So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

“Wade in the Water”

+ *In nomine Domini. Amen.*

Who is outside the circle of God's love?

That is the haunting question asked by the Story which is at the same time God's Story and our Story – for that is what happens each week when we place ourselves within the walls of this Church Nave ... this *naves* (in Latin) this “ship” of faith into which we climb each Sunday, which we board when we come here and quiet ourselves before the liturgy begins ... this ship upon which we are carried from our baptism to our death and beyond our death into the endless time of God.

Who is outside? ... Who is not welcome to board the vessel? ... Who must be left behind and for what reason?

Those are the questions which we meet and which meet us as we put ourselves into the Story, into hearing the Story, into letting the Story touch us and reach us and teach us this week.

It begins with a General who is an outsider, an Aramean (Syria today) who has a skin disorder and is advised by a young girl who had been taken captive on one of the Aramean raids upon the Israelites. She speaks to her mistress, Naaman's wife and urges the General to seek the aid of Elisha a prophet in Israel.

Naaman sends a letter of introduction to the King of Israel. The King of Israel explodes in anger and perhaps a bit of fear that his enemy wants to come down and be helped.

Elisha intervenes and suggests that the King might just learn something from all this.

The King invites Naaman. Naaman arrives at Elisha's house. Elisha looks him over and tells him to go down to the Jordan River and wash himself there seven times.

Naaman explodes in anger muttering that the all the rivers back home are much better than the sometimes cloudy water of the Jordan ... and besides, why doesn't this so-called prophet wave his hands and say something magical and healing over me?

Everyone is getting angry. Everyone is exploding in wrath and indignation. Outsiders and insiders trying to deal with one another ... denial and denunciation taking over the minds and hearts of otherwise thoughtful people ...

... sounds much like the Legislature in its conversations during these last few days of this year's "Session" ...

The General's servants know better ... their heads are not in the clouds of distrust, but in matters of compassion and caring ... they even address their leader as they would a parent ... saying, "Be reasonable. If Elisha had asked you to do something complicated would you have not done it? So why be a stubborn mule now that he asked you to do something simple?"

And so he does. He goes. He wades in the water. He is cleansed. He is healed. He is restored. His life is given back. And (if you continue to read the Story in the Book of Kings) he goes back to Syria and gives praise and worship to the God of Israel.

The one who was outside is not within the fold. That's what healing means. That's what healing always means. It is not always miraculous; bad things do not go away quickly or sometimes even permanently; but moving from outside to inside, from outcast to a place at the table ... that is healing.

At all levels.

Personal. Familial. Congregational. Communal. National. Global.

Removing the "outside-ness" of the one who is always outside or ... the one we always keep outside ... for reasons of what? Keeping ourselves pure and clean maybe ...

I have the most difficult time when I hear story after story of someone going into a different community of faith and being turned away ...

"I'm sorry you're not welcome at Holy Communion." Now there's a statement isn't it? Not welcome?! "Why?" I once asked another Lutheran Pastor.

"Because for us to share Holy Communion would declare unity, that we are both one."

"Yes," I answered, "That's the whole point. It will!"

“But,” he continued, “You don’t understand.”

“Right again,” said I, “I don’t!”

It’s like having a great feast and welcoming strangers to the meal and then saying, “Oh, you are really not one of us are you. Sorry, you’ll have to sit there while the rest of us gorge ourselves on this abundance.”

Having the means to heal, and not offering healing to those who want it ... is the sin.

Last evening, after a long day, I was here in my office and the Saturday janitor asked what you had to do to be married in this church?

“Well,” I answered, “You need a bride and a groom.”

“No,” he said, “I mean do you have to be baptized, confirmed, a Lutheran, whatever ... or can you be of a different *faith*?”

I assured him that I would be honoured to preside at his wedding ... but he did need a license (!) We laughed, shook hands, smiled, and someday soon ...

I wrote a note to myself last week ...

When things get crazy, or the world becomes troubled, or terrors abound, or fear strikes us, or people are different, or want to cross borders, or wish for healing and maybe a piece of bread at our table ...

I’ve noticed that religious people fall backwards onto Doctrine.

No we can’t ... because it says here in our canon of church life thus-and-so ...

Doctrine never saved anybody or anyone.

Healing, says the Story, is Doctrine-free.

“What,” I was once asked, “does it take for my child to receive Holy Communion here?”

“An open hand,” I replied, “When I see an outstretched hand ... I put bread into it. That’s what Jesus did ... that’s what we do.”

It’s all about outstretched hands and putting things into those hands ... bread, wine, food, healing, forgiveness, love, understanding, hope ...

Who is outside the circle of God’s love?

The answer is ... No one. None of us, not any one of us, or another other, is outside the circle of God’s love.

As you know this is *Black History Month* and if you have been watching your PBS station there have been a multitude of shows broadcast about things like the Freedom Riders of the 1960s and the Underground Railroad of the Civil War which assisted people in slavery and bondage to flee from South to North and gain their freedom.

As I looked over the readings for this Sunday, one song kept finding its way into my head, singing itself into my heart. I’d like to read the lyrics of that song for you now.

Harriet Tubman sang this spiritual as a warning to runaway slaves. As with most *spirituals* the words are a coded language. To escaping slaves, the song told them to abandon the path and move into the water. By traveling along the water’s edge or across a body of water, the slaves would throw chasing dogs and their keepers off the scent.

Wade In the Water

Chorus:

*Wade in the water,
Wade in the water children.
Wade in the water
God's gonna trouble the water*

Who's all those children all dressed in Red?
God's gonna trouble the water.
Must be the ones that Moses led.
God's gonna trouble the water.

Chorus:

What are those children all dressed in White?
God's gonna trouble the water.
Must be the ones of the Israelites.
God's gonna trouble the water.

Chorus:

Who are these children all dressed in Blue?
God's gonna trouble the water.
Must be the ones that made it through.
God's gonna trouble the water.

Chorus:

When we *wade in the water* of our Baptism, of the Story of Healing and Hope, of welcoming and finding a place at the Table, then we ... and all our brothers and all our sisters ... have found the Source of healing and strength and love and hope.

Now please let us stand and confess our faith together, as we say:

APOSTLES CREED

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

*Deo Gratias (+)
The Rev. Benjamin Larzelere III
Pastor, Christ Lutheran Church
Santa Fe, NM*