

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 3, 2016

“Go Soak Yourselves”
by Mary Anne Biggs

2 Kings 5:1-14 ~ Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Tomorrow is the Fourth of July. Let me be honest ... it is not easy to preach on the Fourth of July weekend. It is a time of passionate, and sometimes competing, loyalties. In many churches, all the hymns today will be patriotic ... a color guard will march down the aisle with the American flag ... and the congregation will rise to sing the national anthem. The sermon will focus on our "Christian nation" and our divinely appointed destiny to be the wealthiest and most powerful people in the world. Visitors from abroad might wonder whether God or our nation is the object of worship in those churches today.

Politics has always been a passionate subject in our democracy. If you go back and read some of the political exchanges, say, during the McCarthy era or the Vietnam War, the hair will stand up on the back of your neck. I've only been politically aware for maybe 50 years, but I cannot remember a time when we have been so deeply and emotionally divided to the point where dialogue is almost impossible. Increasingly we are pressured to be absolute in taking "love us/hate you" stances with either "red" or "blue" America. We are divided into "sides" on a whole conglomeration of issues, and if you raise dissent on any one of those issues you risk being marginalized. Our civil discourse is so uncivil. We have taken the in-your-face trash-talk off the basketball courts on to our airwaves and legislatures. We demonize the opposition, and refuse to admit any good about their side or any bad about our own.

This polarization affects even our churches. We have some "blues" in our congregation who admire the President and support his policies and we have a number of "reds" on the other side who strongly disagree. There are some things we just don't talk about with each other across those lines because we don't want to risk the relationships we share ... but the unspoken concerns are still a barrier to our full communion with each other.

So how do I preach on this Fourth of July weekend? Maybe I shouldn't be saying anything about the Fourth of July at all. There will be many patriotic celebrations in the area this weekend and that is wonderful ... but this is church. This is God's house and it belongs to all God's people of whatever nation. This is not a place for nationalism of any form. That's why we're told not to put flags in the sanctuary of God. Make no mistake, as Christians, our loyalty to God is first and highest ... even above our loyalty to our nation. We participate in our democracy out of our Christian ideals. But sometimes, our loyalties collide. As Americans we feel proud of our wealth and power in the world, but wealth and power are what the Satan tempted Jesus to worship and Jesus just said "no." As Christians, the Bible insists that God measures the worth of a nation *not* by its wealth and power ... but by its justice and righteousness ... by whom it includes and whom it excludes ... by how it treats its own poor and the needy in the land. Ironically, those are *not* the values of many who are so vocal as Christians in American politics these days. Contrary to those who want to force their faith on the rest of us, the Founders *did*

intend a separation between church and state in our nation. It's a tightrope walk sometimes, but let us err on the side of caution because the mixture of politics and religion has brought disaster to many a nation.

We have more opportunity than any nation before to be a blessing to the world, but we are divided. We are torn apart by greed and violence and fear, and we are much more anxious about our security than our service to the world. I could talk a long time about that, but who am I to do so? I certainly don't have all the answers ... do you? And when we don't have all the answers, it's time to humble ourselves and pray.

Well, you see my dilemma as a preacher. Maybe I should just stick to the scripture for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost today. Our Hebrew Scripture story introduces us to Naaman, chief commander over all the army of Aram, which is modern day Syria. Aram had a long history of conflict with Israel. Commander Naaman was accustomed to people following his orders ... falling all over themselves to please him. Powerful, wealthy, second only to the King in the land, Naaman was at the top of the human heap. But, the scripture notes ironically, that he was a leper. It seems that wealth and power only go so far.

This is what it means to be human. We all have our flaws, our weaknesses, our areas of struggle and temptation, our diseases of body and soul. We think too simplistically of people being either a success or a failure ... but the truth is that we are all a mixture ... successful in some areas and a failure in others. Pride ... and its ugly cousin, shame ... lead us to deny our flaws and push our successes forward in our minds, especially in the competitive dog-eat-dog world. But Naaman couldn't hide his weakness, and neither can we.

In those days any skin condition like psoriasis or eczema was called leprosy, and lepers were ostracized, isolated, shunned. Every culture has its lepers, those who are forced to hide from polite society and to suffer on their own. Not so long ago divorced people were treated as lepers in our culture, regardless of what caused the divorce. Alcoholics, addicts, people living with AIDS, but also women, racial minorities, gays and lesbians, the transgendered. Have you ever been made to feel like a leper ... ostracized from some group? This is another reason we hide our weaknesses ... as much as we can ... and as long as we can ... until we spend more energy hiding than seeking help ... or health ... or authentic community. But you can't get help if you don't admit your flaws and you can't find community unless you seek a people who will love you as you are while encouraging you to be all God wants you to be. On the other hand, there is no doubt that our society needs healing so that we will quit treating any of God's beloved children as lepers.

Naaman was fortunate enough to have the means to sustain himself in spite of his condition. At least he could afford health insurance and his HMO would pay for any treatment he might want, but there was nothing money and power could do. His leprosy threatened everything for which he had worked. It sounds like he is doomed, until we meet the next person in this story ... a slave girl in his household. She was captured on one of Naaman's raids against Israel, and joined to his house as a servant according to the custom of that day. Talk about a study in contrasts. Here is Naaman, one of the most famous, wealthy, and powerful persons in his land. And here is a slave girl, about as poor and powerless as you can get. The Bible doesn't even remember her name for us, but she is the key to the whole story.

Who could blame her if she secretly rejoiced that her captor was sick? What is in her that frees her to want health ... even for this man ... the chief enemy of her people? She tells her mistress, Naaman's wife, of a prophet in Israel who can help him. Naaman is desperate. Anything is worth a try, and he follows the path of power to arrange a meeting. His King sends Naaman to the King of Israel with a boat load of money and a letter instructing the King to cure Naaman of his leprosy. The King of Israel sees a set up. His wealth and power can't do for Naaman what all the wealth and power in Aram, could not do. The King of Israel tears his clothes in the classic sign of consternation. Well, Naaman is used to that kind of reception. His whole mode of being is to strike fear in the heart of his enemies.

I guess word of the meeting spread, because next we hear from the prophet Elisha who gets word to Israel's King: "Send Naaman to me," he says! OK, picture this. Naaman's chariots riding up to Elisha's place in a scene right out of Ben Hur. Elisha isn't impressed. He doesn't even come to the door. Instead, he sends a messenger out who tells Naaman "Go soak yourself in the Jordan seven times." Isn't that great!? Elisha doesn't really do anything in this story but tell Naaman "Go soak yourself!" But Naaman isn't used to being dissed like that, and it makes him furious! He expects Elisha to grovel, to come out and invoke his God's power, cure him and be grateful for the opportunity to be of service to the mighty master of Aram. What's more, Elisha offends Naaman's national pride. *"Are not the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?"* I suspect if Naaman had been the mighty master of Israel, Elisha would have told him to go soak in the rivers of Damascus.

Naaman rides away in a huff, but when he cools down to a simmer, his servants say, "You know, the Jordan's on our way home. And there's nothing so hard about this. It's worth a try." Naaman is still desperate. So he goes to the Jordan. He has his lieutenants set a perimeter so no one will see his humiliation. He wades into the river, immerses himself in its muddy water, and rising, looks at his hands. No change. "This is ridiculous!" he says, and starts for the shore. "No, no, seven times!" his servants shout. "You've come this far. Give it a chance." Again. No change. Again. And again. No change. No change. No change. But on the seventh time, Naaman rises from the water clean as a new born baby. The leprosy is gone. And so is his pride.

We didn't read the rest of the story today, but here's what happens. Naaman goes back to Elisha and offers his thanks. Something has happened inside Naaman as well as on the outside. He swears he will only worship the God of Israel from now on ... well ... except for those occasions when he *has* to go worship the high god of Aram with his king, which he hopes the God of Israel will understand. Funny how quickly we renege on our promises to God after God has seen us through a tight spot. *"Go in peace,"* Elisha offers as a benediction, or maybe as a suggestion about Naaman's future relations with Israel. Naaman offers a big reward, which Elisha refuses absolutely. You don't buy God's favor. But one of Elisha's servants, Gehazi, sees his chance to make a buck and rides after Naaman to ask for some cash in Elisha's name. Elisha sees what has happened and announces that Gehazi will bear Naaman's leprosy because of his greed.

Now where shall we go with this story? I am tempted to talk about the cleansing power of baptism, not as a magical cure for disease but as the cure for the disease of our soul, our pride, our idolatry, our foolish worship of wealth and power. To be a Christian is to worship a different God. Or is this a story about humility, because Elisha understood Naaman's real problem was not his leprosy but his arrogance ... and if anything characterizes our style of political debate these days, it's arrogance and tough talk and contempt for those who disagree with us? Or is this

a story about God's love for all persons regardless of their nationality and God's desire that all should be healed? It really turns nationalism and the whole concept of the enemy on its head, doesn't it? That's how Jesus applies the story in fourth chapter of Luke when he preaches at the synagogue in Nazareth. He says, "*There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian*" (Luke 4:27). He made the people so angry by reminding them of this that they wanted to stone him. And all these centuries later, we still don't want to believe that God loves other nations and peoples as much as God loves us.

So maybe this scripture story for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost is just what we need to hear on the Fourth of July weekend in Eagle River, WI. To any citizens of other nations let us say, "You are our brothers and sisters in Christ. God loves you and we want to welcome you to our church where we worship the God who includes us all. Let us pray together for peace and prosperity to touch every soul in our world." And to citizens of the United States who have another occasion beyond worship to celebrate this weekend, let us say it's certainly right for us to love our nation and thank God for our freedoms. But we must also use our freedom responsibly to critique our nation and its policies, whether our party is in power or out of power ... always to ask ... are we adhering in every way we can to the highest ideals of our nation? What about the poor, the forgotten, the dispossessed of our land and our world? How shall their voices be heard? Because if the Bible tells us anything it tells us they are God's first concern ... God's priority ... God's own favorites. Beloved, as Christians first ... but also as citizens of this nation ... let us pray for our nation and the leaders of all parties. And let us in all humility as persons and as a people pray, "God help us. God guide us. God have mercy upon us."

Let us pray.

God of all people, thank you for the freedom we have to worship you today and for those who have brought that freedom to us. Help us to use our freedom to serve you and love all persons as you love all persons in the world. We pray for our leaders and the leaders of all nations that you would grant them wisdom, humility, compassion, and a vision for peace. Loving God, help us. Guide us. Have mercy on us, in Jesus' name. Amen.