

Proper 9C

Pentecost 6
July 4, 2010

St. Andrew's

2 Kings 5.1-14
Ps 30
Galatians 6.(1-6), 7-16
Luke 10.1-11, 16-20

I was certain I'd be writing a sermon about moving this week. It has consumed all our "spare" time and it's nearly all we've thought about. With scriptures about Naaman traveling to be healed and Jesus sending out the 70 I didn't think there would be much trouble talking about being on the move.

But as study and prayer would have it, sometimes you get something stuck in your head you can't let it go, so you'd better attend to what it has to say to you. It was in a commentary by someone who sounds familiar but isn't, Carol Holtz-Martin, as she wrote about our reading from Galatians. As we have heard over the past several weeks, Paul is concerned that the Galatians are too worried about keeping the letter of the law. His teaching is that there is no longer a need for a Gentile to first become a Jew in order to then become a Christian and that included laws on food and circumcision. Holtz-Martin summed up the debate with: circumcision schmircircumcision! And that's where I was hooked.

So here we are today on a national holiday; a glorious day for its citizens – our 234th Independence Day and we have just passed Canada Day on July 1. The celebrations are filled with reminders of the freedoms we have and the cost to obtain and maintain them. We have much for which to be thankful including the vision and courage of our founding fathers and mothers.

But we can get caught up in national pride and begin to think that God likes us best and is a Republican (or Democrat) and bestows blessings because God thinks and acts like we do and rewards us accordingly. But the scriptures this morning say: Not so fast. The dividing lines, the boundaries which circumscribe Israel as the chosen people, are being abolished.

The Kingdom of God was the original melting pot long before these United States became a nation peopled by an amazing tapestry of immigrants. Heavenly citizenship knows no geographic, ethnic, political or cultural boundaries. Every person in every location around the world is equidistant to the heart of God. All those things which we think separate us from others, make us more noble, more pious, more righteous, or more patriotic don't matter in the Kingdom of God. Circumcision schmircircumcision. A new creation is everything!

Naaman probably didn't really want to find that out. He was a foreign and enemy commander and if it hadn't been for the small matter of his leprosy, he might never have ventured out of his nationalistic comfort and power zone. This is such a great story because although it's about Naaman, he's not the prime mover in this story of God's grace and generosity. The anonymous

slave girl from Israel, the anonymous servant of Elisha, and the anonymous slaves of Naaman himself are the deliverers of God's promise of healing to an outsider.

And Naaman didn't want to hear the sheer simplicity of it: *Wash and be clean*. He arrived with all his military bluster and gold, silver, horses and chariots expecting a healing fit for a someone of his power and might. The great prophet Elisha didn't even come out of the house to speak with him, and just washing in that muddy little Jordan River couldn't possibly be effective; he could have done that at home in a much more glamorous river.

Haywood Spangler writes that like Naaman, we sometimes assume that our expectations are the measure of God's ability to work in creation. We want God to do something for us, in the particular way we want it done, on a schedule we devise. This healing was mediated by anonymous nobodies for a needy foreigner who was skeptical of Elisha's God; a revelation even to outsiders of who God is.

There are some who view this washing, simple washing, as being a precursor to baptism. Whether that is precisely true or not really doesn't matter although the New Testament looks back into the Old Testament for fulfillment of prophecy all the time. Being made clean with water is central to our Christian belief and our relationship with Jesus and is why the church views baptism as one of two primary sacraments – the other is the Holy Eucharist.

We're going to have the privilege of a baptism next Sunday and a timely article was posted on the internet about baptism this week. It was a news report about a private Christian school in California that fired two of its teachers because they had not been baptized as adults by immersion, but presumably as infants or small children. Because they did not agree to be rebaptised, they were fired. We can talk about the theology behind infant baptism another time, but it highlights another type of boundary we can put up to keep some in (those who believe like we do) and some out (those who are wrong, of course).

I'm guessing that the God who healed an enemy leader and sent 70 people out to spread the gospel beyond Israel essentially says "immersion/schmimmersion" and "pouring/schmouring" is less concerned with the means of baptism than about the transformation of the life it heralds. It's easy for us to fall away from the gracious nature of the gospel and the offering of that grace to all. Spangler continues that Elisha's response to Naaman might move us to welcome strangers without insisting that they first embrace all the theological and ecclesiastical beliefs of our particular tradition.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus sends 70 (or 72 in some translations) out into a hostile world. Not the twelve as in Matthew; already Luke is showing us that the gospel is for the world, for the enemies as well as the patriots. The missionary church is beginning and is a reminder to us that the official name of the Episcopal Church is the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society – DFMS – hearkening back to Jesus and Elisha. Jesus sends out 70 others to prepare the way for his arrival in new places and to carry on his ministry without his physical presence. He knows the world is filled with wolves but he sends them out like lambs and instructs that they are simply to announce *Peace* to the household and proclaim that *the kingdom of God has come near to you*. We are bound to God through grace. Exotic healings are not required.

Circumcision schmircumcision; outward religious ritual is nothing; inward spiritual transformation is everything. God calls us and Jesus sends us, just as he sent the 70, to show that love is the only redemptive power in the world. We are called to encounter Jesus Christ in our midst and show the kingdom of God to those in greatest need of its peace.

Since it's Independence Day today, a poem comes to my mind. It was written by Emma Lazarus, a great Jewish-American poet who has had a monument installed in her memory at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York City. It is called *The Great Colossus*, written in 1893, and it is inscribed on a bronze plaque which was mounted on the Statue of Liberty in 1903. The part with which we are most familiar reads:

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest tossed to me.

That seems much like what our Lord must have had in mind when he sent the 70 out to proclaim the kingdom throughout Israel and far beyond. And Elisha in healing a foreign outsider. Laborers out in to the field to bring in the harvest. The poor, the sick, the empty, the broken. Yearning for a freedom in God which may not be able to be imagined.

Go out with peace. Return with joy. The kingdom of God has come near.

Gail Wheatley+