

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
2 Kings 5:1-14, Psalm 30, Luke 10:1-11, 16-20
July 3, 2016
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Elijah and his successor, Elisha, were early prophets and miracle workers in Israel during the 9th century B.C. Stories about them are written primarily in the books of First and Second Kings. The story we heard this morning involving Naaman and Elisha is one of my very favorites with important lessons to be learned. I can imagine the Jewish people telling and retelling this story around the campfire and every time falling off their log seats in uproarious laughter.

The story contrasts the insignificant common person with the very rich and powerful, somewhat like the story of David and Goliath.

We can picture the large, square-jawed, muscular Naaman in full regalia and in full command of himself and the entire Aramean or Syrian army. He would be an awesome and fearful presence. Yet he had a slight, physical flaw – some sort of skin disease. We can imagine it may have been an embarrassment to this otherwise tower of intimidation and strength.

A young maiden girl taken captive from Israel on an earlier military victory by the Syrians tells her mistress, Naaman's wife, about a prophet in her home country who could cure Naaman. Naaman's lord, the king of Aram, sends a note and considerable wealth to the King of Israel, perhaps a bit confused about who the actual healer is.

The king of Israel is portrayed as weak and afraid that the Syrians are trying to trick him with this ploy about healing Naaman of leprosy. Fortunately for him, Elisha gets wind of the powerful visitor from Aram and sends for Naaman.

When Naaman arrives at Elisha's presumably humble abode along with all his imposing entourage, Elisha is so unimpressed that he sends a messenger out to Naaman with instructions for him to rinse seven times in the Jordan River.

Very important Naaman is not accustomed to being treated, in his opinion, so disrespectfully. Elisha didn't even come out in person and, instead of healing him with a wave of his hand, has the audacity to inconvenience his generalship by sending him to the inferior little Jordan River rather than one of the two mighty rivers in his own country.

We are told, "He [Naaman] turned and went away in a rage."

His pride would have gotten the best of him if it weren't for the care and concern of his servants. They convince him to change his mind and wash in the Jordan where he is completely healed. (By the way, he does return to thank Elisha and acknowledge the God of Israel.)

In this story, commanders and kings show total incompetence in the matters of God, while a slave girl and other servants provide divine wisdom and guidance.

In a much later biblical story, a poor handmaiden will say “Yes” to the angel Gabriel and become the mother of God. St. Paul would write to the church of Corinth, “...but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.” (1 Corinthians 1: 27 – 29)

Perhaps we need to listen more carefully to people we might consider to be of a lower stature than ourselves. And better yet, maybe we shouldn’t consider anyone inferior or of a lesser stature than ourselves, for we are all supposed to be one in Christ Jesus.

Unique to Luke’s gospel is the story of Jesus sending out the 70. Who are the 70? That’s a good question. They are more than likely anonymous people like the surprising heroes from the story in 2 Kings. They are without formal training except that Jesus has changed their lives and welcomed them into his fellowship, which he calls the kingdom of God.

God doesn’t need us to be exceptional to be useful. We only need to be willing to serve.

Church leaders sometimes talk about two kinds of churches. One is the “maintenance-minded” church and the other is the “mission-minded” church. These concepts are not new.

The maintenance-minded church is primarily concerned with survival – keeping the enterprise going so the present membership can continue to have a place to gather for worship and fellowship. Older members especially want to be sure the church is there when they die so their funeral can be in a familiar place. Maintenance-minded churches, as the name implies, put a considerable amount of energy and resources into building upkeep and repairs.

Mission-minded churches are primarily concerned with using their energy and resources to spread God’s love to people who haven’t yet experienced it. Yes, they need a suitable meeting space, but the focus is on continually developing new ways to reach out to the unchurched.

One Episcopal Church in Florida decided to start a new ministry in a local Laundromat. Several members go there one night a month and offer to pay for the washers and dryers their less fortunate neighbors are using. It is creating strong bonds among the church members and the patrons.

Members of a nondenominational church in England started going to their local pub and buying a drink for the people there. If the recipient asks why they’re doing it, they take the opportunity to talk about their faith and their church. Providing free alcohol to strangers may not be

advisable for most Christian churches and I don't recommend it, but it's an example of trying something novel to spread and further God's kingdom.

It seems to me a healthy church needs to be equally concerned with property upkeep and mission and ministry outside the church walls. I am well aware that our vestry members have spent considerable time in the last few years making decisions and allocating money for a new heating system, new windows, roof repairs and now stained glass upgrades. These sorts of costly projects won't end since our buildings are expansive and aging.

I wonder, however, whether we ought to have another group of 12 or so members who meet monthly to pray, brainstorm and strategize ways to extend our reach into the community in addition to our present outreach efforts. If being part of this sort of group is of interest to you, let me know. Maybe we could call ourselves "The Seventy." AMEN.