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Proper 9

Humility & Patriotism

This is a week of significant anniversaries in North America. July 1 is the 149th year since the passage of the British North America Act, creating the Dominion of Canada, July 1-3 is the 153th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, the turning point in the American Civil War, and July 4th marks 240 years since the Declaration of Independence.

Yesterday marked the death of Elie Weisel, holocaust survivor from Buchenwald and Aushwitz, author of many books, Nobel laureate and someone I got to know and corresponded with for several years. His life was dedicated to peace and compassion and freedom. I'll never forget a small group gathering I was at with him when someone asked him about the time he publicly criticized President reagan for visiting a German cemetery. Many of those that were buried there were members of the Third Reich and Reagans visit caused controversy about that. I was at a small talk he was holding after the event and someone in the audience was verbally bashing Regan for doing so and wanted to engage Weisel a similar vein. I'll never forget the way he responded - he said I disagree with the president's decision to go there and not choose a different cemetery, but nowhere else could I call

up the president like I did and tell him his actions were a mistake - and not be silenced in some way. I applaud the freedom in this country.

I have been thinking a lot about freedom this week. What are we free from? What are we free for? There have already been fireworks and celebrating freedom.

My husband is from New York and we visit them once every two years and we usually take the ferry to go see Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty. We each have people in our family background who have come through those gates in Ellis Island seeking a new land, seeking freedom.

His story is found in the book of Kings, which is just what it sounds like – a history of the Kings of Israel, from David to Zedekiah. Naaman shows up about halfway through, when Jehoam was king of Israel. Although Israel and her neighbor, Aram (which we now know as Syria) were frequently at war, they were momentarily at peace.

Aram had the better army, however, and Israel knew it. Naaman the commander for the Aramean army, had beaten them more than once. His name oddly means ‘pleasant’ – an unlikely name for warrior, but there was something about him because even his enemies admitted that Naaman was a great man, whom God had favored in battle.

Namaan also had leprosy, which was not as big a problem for a Syrian as it might have been for a Jew, but it ate away at Namaan in more ways than one.

He was a national hero after all - He had an office with a view at the Aramean Pentagon. He hobnobbed with heads of state! But there was always that awkward moment when he met people for the first time. You can imagine - some probably handled their surprise well, but others stared at him or looked quickly away.

And then Naaman finds hope from an unlikely person - the reading says

“ the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife.” The young girl said there was a prophet in her homeland who might be the solution. She was talking about Elisha, the prophet we learned about last week, who had just taken over for Elijah.

Naaman’s first response is typical, although it didn’t work - he gets a letter of introduction from his king to Israel’s king; and he headed over there with silver, gold and a rack of designer clothes, off he goes to buy back his well-being. The girl told him of a prophet, but he chooses instead to seek out a king.

The king of Israel was not happy with the request and – 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.”

He thought it was some ploy to start a new battle. He is only a king, not God. As outrageous as it may seem, Naaman is then referred from the halls of power...

to a faith- healer.

And off he goes with horses, chariots, servants, money – Naaman and his entourage appear in the driveway of Elisha the prophet. The front door opens but it is not Elisha who steps out. Elisha has sent a messenger with a simple but rather odd set of instructions – “Naaman,

go wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.” Just as quickly the messenger closes the door behind him.

Naaman does not take it well. He is a dignitary – accustomed to deference. He’d expected a welcome fit for someone of his position – he’d imagined a pomp and circumstance ceremony with Elisha himself calling on his God, waving his hand over the leprous spots and an immediate cure.

But Elisha doesn’t seem to recognize the importance of the general standing out front...

It reminds me of a story I heard a bishop tell - he said he had gotten elected bishop, just ordered his fancy new bishop clothes with the purple buttons and finery - and he was trying them on at home. He proudly walked into his kitchen, mitre on his head, bishop's crozier (staff that they carry) in hand and stood to show his wife. She looked at him and said - don't forget to take out the trash- they are going to be here soon.

Elisha sent a lowly assistant and Naaman was incensed. What kind of shabby welcome was this? Where was Elisha, the man of God? the prophet?

The leprosy cure would require seven baths in the Jordan – an unimpressive little stream far beneath Naaman's dignity. There were beautiful, majestic rivers back in Syria much more suited to someone of his stature. He hadn't traveled this far to bathe in a ditch and he turned away in a rage.

But his servants must've known Naaman pretty well – well enough to know that he was more hurt than mad – because they tiptoed up to him and convinced him to give it a try.

“If he had given you something hard to do, you would have done it, right?” they reasoned with him. “So he gave you something simple. So?”

That is when the real miracle begins. It is not so much that the Jordan had magical powers, it is that Naaman finally gives up self-importance and self-control... and surrendered-

that is when healing grace is able to pour over him. His cure begins. His luggage full of money cannot buy it. His power is of no use. His political connections and VIP status... meaningless. It is as Naaman strips himself of his self-image and his self-reliance and walks humbly into the Jordan river that healing begins.

Naaman, felt it wash over him. This powerful commander of armies lowers himself into the water.

Naaman makes his way out to the deepest part of the water and begins to follow directions. “Wash and be clean,” the messenger said. Seven times he goes down under the water and feels it wash over him. The first couple of dips had to be the hardest. By the 5th and 6th he must have been wondering whether he’d been taken for a fool. But in the 7th dip, by a baptism of sorts, Naaman experiences healing -His skin, the text says, was like the skin of a young boy. He was made new.

Professor Barbara Brown Taylor says it well – “All Naaman had to do was follow directions. All he had to do was empty himself out, abandoning the pretense that who he was or what he was worth could get him what he

needed... then God did for him what military victories and kings and bags of money could never do. God created him all over again...”⁴

Naaman’s story, is our story. Might it be that our own healing, the healing of our families, our communities and our nation has everything to do with letting go of the identities to which we cling, the illusion of control, admitting our need, and surrendering to divine direction?

Might it be that through the story of a struggling Syrian general God asks us as a faith community to go and wash ourselves in the Jordan? Not in the literal sense, of course, but in the Jordan of God’s way of life – ...

Whether it is the usual means – prayer, that sometimes seems like a waste of time; immersing ourselves in Scripture, that can demand our full intellect and heart; making VBS or Sunday School come alive for our children; or journeying one more time to Upper Room or SHARE, where often our contributions go unnoticed. Or, maybe our surrender is a simple request for help.

We learn from Naaman that it is in the humbling, seemingly preposterous acts of surrendering to God that we become whole.

We learn that well-being cannot be bought but is ours in moments of humility... of surrender. Sometimes healing is found in ways and places that make no sense... until you step on in.

I am going to end with a portion of a speech that Elie Weisel after he received American citizenship. The description of soldiers brought to free those from the concentration shows these soldiers being humbled with what they encountered and their compassion as they worked to set free those prisoners:

“The day I received American citizenship was a turning point in my life. I had ceased to be stateless.

I cannot forget another day that remains alive in my memory: April 11, 1945. That day I encountered the first American soldiers in the Buchenwald concentration camp. I remember them well.

Bewildered, disbelieving, they walked around the place, hell on earth, where our destiny had been played out. They looked at us, just liberated, and did not know what to do or say. Survivors snatched from the dark throes of death, we were empty of all hope—too weak, too emaciated to hug them or even speak to them. Like lost children, the American soldiers wept and wept with rage and sadness. And we received their tears as if they were heartrending offerings from a wounded and generous humanity.

... I reread the Declaration of Independence, a document sanctified by the passion of a nation's thirst for justice and sovereignty, forever admiring both its moral content and majestic intonation. Opposition to oppression in all its forms, defense of all human liberties, celebration of what is right ...

America understands that a nation is great not because its economy is flourishing or its army invincible but because its ideals are loftier. ..

No one nation is composed of saints alone. All have their Cain and Abel. It takes vision and courage to undergo serious soul-searching.”

As we celebrate freedom as a nation and other freedoms from those things that keep us from being who God imagines us to be, may we have the courage and humility to turn our will and our lives over to God's care.

Resources:

Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*