

Sermon: Making the Hard Call Easy

Year C, Proper 9

[2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Isaiah 66:10-14; Psalm 66:1-9; Galatians 6:\(1-6\), 7-16;](#)

[Luke 10:1-11,16-20](#)

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Naaman is a tough guy with an important job and a powerful boss. He also has some kind of skin disease which will force him into social isolation. The text says *leprosy* (2 Kings 5:1), which could mean leprosy, or eczema or psoriasis or even just a rash. But whatever we would diagnose it as, it keeps him from normal contact with the people around him. You can't be a mighty warrior, you can't be a commander of an army, you can't stay in high favor with a king (2 Kings 5:1) if everyone has to shun you. So whatever this skin disease is, it's complicating Naaman life no end. It's a big enough challenge that the king of Aram, Naaman's boss, is willing to pay a ton of money for his participation in some experimental trial being run in Israel.

Elisha is a man of God (2 Kings 5:8) and he tells Naaman to wash seven times in the River Jordan to be healed. Elisha is a prophet, so that clues us in that he will see under the present, not into the future; he'll name what his people are numb to, what is causing them grief. He'll articulate the yearnings of the community, especially those hopes they have learned to ignore. Prophets don't always offer solutions, but they do offer a vision or a symbol.

Looking at this situation, it seems like Elisha's work is pretty easy. The skin disease is causing Naaman grief. Elisha says that Naaman needs to bathe in the River Jordan. We modern folk can look at this situation and think it's kind of like going to the doctor and getting some hydrocortisone cream.

But to the Israelites, a skin disease is the outward sign that something is wrong in your relationship with God. You've done something against God and this is how it shows up. That's why they have to shun you, keep away from you, can't eat with you. We modern people don't see it that way. So we miss what Elisha is saying. Sure, he's saying, wash in the River Jordan. But Naaman is right too. He could have washed in the Abana and Pharpar Rivers. They're much closer to home and wouldn't have cost him a shekel, let alone six thousand of them (2 Kings 5:5).

Elisha is pointing out something Naaman is numb to. Naaman is a guy who likes to be in charge, who thinks he controls his entire destiny. But no one can do that. Life's too complicated, too complex, too chaotic to give any one of us the ability to control it. Naaman isn't willing to take an easy solution that comes from God through God's prophet Elisha because Naaman's incredibly hard problem can't possibly be solved by something as easy as acknowledging that God's in charge. Washing in the River Jordan isn't hard. It's a symbol of how hard we human are willing to let things become in order to keep our illusions that we're in charge.

The reading from Luke appears to offer the flip side of the story from 2 Kings. Jesus is sending an armada of disciples out ahead of him to prepare the way for his ministry. We're disciples of Jesus. We've been sent ahead to prepare the way for others to come into relationship with Jesus. So let's review here: folding chairs, bulletins, microphone, speaker, video camera, chalice and paten, guitar, guitarist, sand toys, sandwich board, wrap in case there's a breeze off the water, handkerchief to mop with in case it's hot, reading glasses, pen to write down prayer requests,

purse, bag, sandals (Luke 10:4). And we greeted each other on road. Ruh-roh. We seem to be drifting from the directions Jesus gave us.

Jesus is sending his disciples out into the world with the authority to cure the sick, exorcise demons, bestow peace, and announce the kingdom of God.¹ Just like Jesus has sent us. But he's asking them to do it the hard way. Personally, I wouldn't want to sit on the ground or perch on a picnic bench or stand the whole time. I would be distracted from God's message. I wouldn't get to make eye contact with as many of you. My gimpy leg would get super sore.

But I don't think that's what Jesus is really asking. Head out into the world with no purse, no bag, no sandals, whatever you decide is your personal modern equivalent (cell phone), and you are reliant on others. You have to let other people give you a place to sleep. You have to eat what other people are eating, even if, especially if, it isn't what you would have chosen for yourself. You are going to be dependent on other people. Like you are dependent on God for your salvation.

You are going to have to accept their hospitality. And instead of getting all tangled up in the weird food they're offering, you have to keep your focus on what is important. You have to focus on accepting their hospitality in such a way that they are open to what you are offering them: healing, driving out the demons that are tearing their life apart, finding true peace. You are offering them the kingdom of God. And it doesn't look or work or operate like anything else in this world. You have to be vulnerable; you have to be open to the possibility that you will be welcomed or you will be rejected.

"Oh, no, no, no," we say. "We could do this much more effectively with a *per diem* that covers a hotel room and restaurants that serve the food we like."² Because we want to be in control. We want to say how we serve God and how we'll be saved. And it just doesn't work like that.

To show that we understand how it works, Jesus offers us a little moment of prophesy. Jesus puts prophetic symbols in our mouths. When we go somewhere and we are not welcomed, we're supposed to say, "*Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you.*" (Luke 10:11). When you are offered true hospitality in Jesus' time, the host washes your feet when you arrive.³ No dust would cling to your feet if you had been truly welcomed. Hospitality and vulnerability. That's what prepares the way for the kingdom of God.

Jesus sends his disciples out ahead of him. They are not responsible for the harvest, God is.⁴ They are not responsible for the laborers, God is.⁵ Jesus sends them out and asks them first to

¹ Elain A. Heath, "Proper 19, Theological Perspective, Luke 10:1-11, 16-20" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 214.

² Marilyn Salmon, "Commentary on Gospel: Luke 10:1-11, 16-20", Working Preacher "Lectionary Commentaries for July 4, 2010, Sixth Sunday after Pentecost", http://www.workingpreacher.org/wp_print_all.aspx?lectionary_calendar_id=148&print_type=comm&is_spanish=0 (accessed 2 July 2019)

³ Mikeal C. Parsons, "Commentary on Gospel: Luke 10:1-11, 16-20", Working Preacher "Lectionary Commentaries for July 3, 2016, Seventh Sunday after Pentecost", http://www.workingpreacher.org/wp_print_all.aspx?lectionary_calendar_id=650&print_type=comm&is_spanish=0 (accessed 2 July 2019)

⁴ Charles B. Cousar, "Proper 9: Luke 10:1-11m 16-20" in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year C*, ed. Charles B. Cousar et al. [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994], 417.

⁵ Cousar, 417.

pray, pray that God will send more laborers for the kingdom. Jesus sends them out and asks them to model his message. To be a good guest in someone's home, to eat what is offered to them, to see strangers as other people who are also beloved of God. To be vulnerable enough to accept hospitality in order that the hospitality can be returned with joy (Luke 10:17). To see evil fall like lightning from this world (Luke 10:18), that's what we have to do.

We have to move past "hard" and "easy," have to move past our own desire to be in charge. We have to step into a prophetic space where we really connect with the grief and hope of those who are longing for the kingdom and don't even know that's what they're longing for. I don't know if that's easier or harder than what we've been doing, but it's what we're called to do.