

Sermon for the 4th of July, 2010

Today in the Book of Kings we have the story of a powerful general and commander of an army. But as Kate Huey reminds us: "It is also a story about "little" people, too, the ones who are so often missed in the larger scheme of things, especially in the way history is written." (Barbara Brown Taylor, in her beautiful sermon on this text, "The Cheap Cure," says that it's also about freedom, a relevant subject on this Fourth of July.) The little people in this story make things happen and so they have their own great power too.

The story of healing wouldn't happen if the "little people," the unnamed ones, didn't move things along. Wouldn't it be interesting to see the story through the eyes of these "surprising prophets"? They live their lives in the shadow of the king's power and magnificence, but Naaman is the star general of the king, a celebrity, if you will, even if he does have an excruciatingly painful flaw, his skin disease. Of all physical ailments, a skin disease is one of the hardest to hide, and it makes Namaan, the mighty warrior, strangely vulnerable." Yet it doesn't prevent him from having a certain sense of his own place that puts him above ordinary people, and ordinary rivers. He walks and talks with kings, he rides at the head of an army, and he has the wherewithal to assemble a great treasure to offer in return for a cure he thinks he can buy, "the best available health care, no doubt anticipating a private, luxurious room for his period of confinement," Brueggemann writes: "Everything can be bought, after all, when you live on top of the world."

"Dianne Bergant says that this little story "champions monotheism and universalism," because Namaan not only professes faith in the One True God of a different nation, Israel, but his healing also demonstrates "God's love and concern for all, Israelite and non-Israelite alike." It's thought-provoking to approach this story from both directions of "outsider-hood." Yes, Namaan was an outsider in Israel, in fact, Frank Anthony Spina describes him as "a man at the furthest possible remove from Israel" because he was a military leader from an enemy land as well as being ritually impure because of his skin condition. But it's even worse, because verse one tells us that Namaan was helped by Israel's own God in vanquishing them, and Spina calls that "galling" to the Israelites. However, approaching it from the opposite direction, Namaan the outsider humbled himself before the prophet of a God not his own, so really Israel, to Namaan, was the outsider. Just as we want to think that we offer hospitality, justice, and healing to "outsiders,"

we're called to be open and humble enough to receive in turn the gifts and hospitality, justice, and healing that "outsiders" bring to our lives and communities.

Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon on this text draws a comparison between Naaman and our nation, so powerful, so mighty, and yet so in need of health. Perhaps we too might consider how to listen more to the "little ones" in the midst of our own society, and be restored to health and a new kind of freedom for ourselves. "You may never hear it again on a Fourth of July weekend," she writes, "but maybe the next time you are saying your prayers for this great, shaky nation of ours, you will remember that great, leprous man Naaman, whose wealth and power turned out to be useless to him in his search for health, and who was ready to trade it all in when God surprised him with a cheap cure that made him truly free."

Dan Clendinen writes: *Christians ought to be geographic, cultural, national and ethnic egalitarians; for us there is no geographic center of the world, but only a constellation of points equidistant from the heart of God. Proclaiming that God lavishly loves all the world, each person, and every place, the Gospel does not privilege any country as exceptional.*

Much has been written about American exceptionalism. In terms of economic, political, military, scientific and cultural dominance, America might be unrivaled, and in that sense "exceptional." Some aspects of American exceptionalism are clearly good, and the 4th of July is a good time to celebrate them, but other parts of our "exceptionalism" are unquestionably bad. Nor is there any guarantee that American exceptionalism will continue, for history teaches us that even the mightiest civilizations come and go.

More importantly, from a theological or Christian point of view, America is no more "exceptional" in God's eyes than any other country. While allowing for a natural and wholesome love, even pride, in your own country :.... Our ultimate citizenship, said Paul, is spiritual rather than earthly (Philippians 3:20).

There's no such thing as a "Christian" politics, and efforts by all political parties to co-opt Jesus badly distort his message. The Jesus of the Gospels proposes no political program, but something far more strenuous, something that historian Garry Wills calls "scary, dark and demanding." No state or political party, says Wills in his book What Jesus Meant, can indulge in

the self-sacrifice that Jesus demands when he asks his followers to lovingly serve the least and the last wherever we find them. But what's impossible for a state is compulsory for a Christian.

Like people in every nation, Christians reflect their particular time and place. We support and enjoy our various countries, but only as if we were resident aliens. We experience an ambivalent and divided loyalty — ultimate loyalty only to the city of God and its "politics" of self-sacrificing love, and merely penultimate loyalty to the city of man.... In the end, we honor "every foreign land" as if it were our own, and experience our own country as a "foreign land."

Let us give thanks for the blessings we have received as a nation, but let us also live up to the responsibilities we have to live up to our calling as followers of Jesus.

Amen.