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2 Kings 5:1-14
July 4, 2010

“Great to Good”

On this Fourth of July Sunday, I’ve been thinking about a quote, often used by Presidents. It comes from a Presbyterian newspaper in the 1800s, assessing the state of our nation. “In the end,” the writer says, “the state of the Union comes down to the character of the people. I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers, and it was not there. In the fertile fields and boundless prairies, and it was not there. In her rich mines and her vast world commerce, and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits, aflame with righteousness, did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.”

The writer’s claims raise interesting questions for us. What does it mean to be American? What does it mean to be a Christian in America? What does it mean to be great? What does it mean to be good? Are they the same? Are they different?

The scripture this morning sheds some light on these questions. There’s Naaman, from Syria, the enemy and foe of Israel. In the eyes of the world, Naaman is the epitome of greatness. He is a military general of the highest order, the David Petraeus of the day: highly decorated, regaled for his military victories over Israel, his knowledge, his strength, his command of the troops.

Fresh from the battlefield, it should be his day, his time to shine. Only, Naaman has a secret. “Though a mighty warrior,” the scripture says, Naaman “suffered from leprosy.” So he finds his world on the verge of collapse. Leprosy threatens to undo all he’s achieved, all he’s accomplished. It threatens to turn this man of greatness into an outcast. To the world around him, Naaman has it all—power, achievement, fame, fortune. But it’s a sham, a lie, a house of cards that could fall at any moment.

From Naaman, the scripture turns our attention to a slave girl who was taken captive during the war with Israel. She is a captive, a prisoner—an *outsider*—pressed into serving Naaman’s wife. Yet, she is not resentful or spiteful. She seems to have embraced the life before her, caring for the general’s wife and even, in a strange way, caring for Naaman himself. The Old Testament Scholar Walter Brueggemann calls this young girl a true evangelist. She pays attention the world around her, engages the needs she sees, even the needs of her captors. She remembers who she is and where she’s from: a child of God, from Israel, a light among the nations. And, she speaks: “If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of leprosy!”

I love what happens next. Naaman, who seems willing to try anything, rushes off to tell the king, who immediately drafts official correspondence and sends Naaman off with more gold and silver and fine garments than anyone could imagine to find the king of Israel. It’s like they’ve heard what the young girl had said, but aren’t really listening. Naaman seeks healing, restoration, wholeness—but he goes to the wrong place: he goes from king to king, from power to power—as if healing were a matter of state, a matter of diplomacy. Not only does he go to the

wrong place, he goes in the wrong way: taking money, wealth, letters proclaiming his rank and status—as if God’s prophet would be swayed by his achievement.

When Naaman finally finds his way to God’s prophet Elisha, he is stunned. Elisha doesn’t even come out to meet him. He sends word by a messenger for Naaman to go and bathe seven times in the Jordan River. It would be like heading over to Carolinas Medical Center and being told, “Just go over to the creek across the road, bathe seven times, and you’ll be fine.”

Elisha’s instructions are not complicated. They are not predicated on having great connections or wealth or power. Elisha’s instructions are something else altogether. They are simple, straightforward, founded on the goodness, the graciousness, the tender love of God Almighty.

This story from Second Kings is a story in contrast, a contrast between greatness and goodness. Naaman and the royals around him choose to see life as a matter of greatness—amassing power and wealth and military victories. That captive servant girl, the prophet Elijah—they have come to trust in the power of a God who calls us to life, whole, abundant, free—life founded on simple things, simple things that give life in us to that which is good and true and holy.

“America is great because America is good.” Could it be that we’ve missed out on what God has in store for us because we’ve been so busy amassing those things the world says are the way to greatness? Who, in our day, is speaking for that which is good, true and holy? Are they the voices we hear at the White House or the Pentagon or on Capitol Hill or in Raleigh?

Maybe that’s what it means to be Christian, to be the Church in America—to live like that slave girl, outsiders embracing the world around us, lifting up those voices at the margins of society, voices that call us to simple things—like taking care of a loved one, or looking out for our neighbors, or befriending a homeless family in the WISH program. We don’t ask for anything complicated there—no one is asked to “save” a family from homelessness, just be their friend, listen to their story, love them for the child of God they are. Or maybe it’s tutoring a child from South Tryon in our CHAMP program. It’s not complicated—getting to know them, hearing their stories, loving them. These are simple things, simple things that hold the keys to all that is good and true and holy in this life. In his new book, Archbishop Desmond Tutu says it well: “The goal of human life is to live beyond the small, narrow prison of our own cares, wants and worries. By learning to choose what is good and right, we give ourselves the keys to true freedom.”

True freedom comes from choosing what is good and right in the world. In the end, Naaman chooses. He leaves his gold and silver at the roadside, strips down and bathes in the river. Maybe that’s what it means to be Christian, to be the Church in America—to empty our hands and our lives of all that clings and clutters and confuses—and trust and live in God alone. I think of the words of William Watkins Reid’s great hymn, O God of Every Nation: “From search for wealth and power, from scorn of truth and right, from trust in bombs that shower destruction through the night, from pride of race and nation and blindness to your way, deliver every nation, eternal God we pray.”

The Dominican priest Timothy Radcliffe tells of a friend of his who once visited churches in Vietnam. Expecting to find a church struggling for survival, he was amazed to find the church was growing, full of life, vitality, and hope. He asked the Archbishop of Ho Chi Min city what was the secret of the wonderful success of the Church in Vietnam, how it could be so alive, so filled with the spirit, so full of hope and possibility. The archbishop replied: “Our church is filled with the Spirit, it is alive and hopeful precisely because we are powerless.”

Today, we come to the Lord's Table. It seems too simple: a tiny piece of bread, a sip of wine. Yet, in this meal, God offers us the grace and power that is the source of life itself. Something like that, we might wonder, must surely have a cost. What should we bring? God says nothing. We can leave our wallets, our status, our achievements behind and simply come. In fact, that's the way we have to come—with our hands outstretched, empty of all that clings and clutters and confuses, ready to receive. Outside, there are bigger things, better things—greater things—going on all around us. Here, God calls us, that we might taste and see what really counts, the goodness of God, the love of God – for us.