

2 Kings 5:1-14 (15-19)
July 4, 2010

South Plains

No God, Except In Israel

In planning our recent vacation, we tried to make reservations in several Bed and Breakfast places in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Most were too expensive, but we did find one called "The 1863 Inn at Gettysburg." It advertised all the amenities at half the price of most B&B's. Despite the charming name and its historic location, The 1863 Inn turned out to be a five story motel draped over a whole city block, admittedly with the famous cemetery across the street, and Civil War houses close at hand, their walls pockmarked by Rebel bullets. Downtown Gettysburg presented two faces, the neon face of rampant commercialism and the more sober face of bloody history. The contrast jolted me into reality: this is how we live our lives every day, pulled between multiple loyalties, committed one minute to a noble cause and the next to making money, bounced around in our roles as patriot, capitalist, Democrat or Republican, Christian, parent, child, friendly neighbor chatting over the fence one day and armed defender of that same fence the next day.

The story of Naaman is a story of multiple loyalties. Commander Naaman was the David Petraeus of the nation of Aram, a powerful country next door to Israel where Syria sits today. Aram was a powerhouse in those days because Naaman had been so successful on

the battlefields. There was one problem. Commander Naaman had a skin disease, a form of leprosy, an embarrassing disfigurement that troubled the great warrior. One day a little servant girl who happened to be Hebrew, mentioned that there was a prophet back home, and she was sure he could cure leprosy. When the king found out there was help for his favorite commander right across the border in Israel or Samaria as it was called, he did what any well-heeled person would do. He immediately made arrangements for Naaman to go to Israel.

And, he made two common assumptions that we sometimes see in kings. First, he assumed that money could buy a cure, so he sent an outrageous fortune. Second, he assumed that the king of Israel was in charge of prophets in his country. He was wrong on both counts. The king of Israel knew nothing about curing leprosy, and less about prophets. "Am I God," he said, "to give death or life.... Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

The two kings in this story do not come off well. They get bogged down in the superficialities of materialism. The king of Aram thinks he can buy a prophet. The king of Israel sees all that wealth as advance payment for an impossible cure, a trap that will give Aram another reason to invade little Israel. The human problem of leprosy is obscured in the glitter of gold and silver, the glamour of ten new outfits. The prophet, the man of God, is forgotten.

Listen to the rest of that story from 2 Kings 5:15-19.

But all is not lost. Elisha the man of God settled the king down by telling the king to send the leper to him. Elisha would show him that there is indeed a prophet in Israel. So Naaman troops off with his horses and chariots to see Elisha. I imagine the prophet peeping out his window and saying to his servant, "What in God's name is that circus doing in my front yard? Go tell that clown to wash in the Jordan seven times and be clean."

This is not the welcome Naaman expected. He's an important man in the Middle East. The prophet should have come out to wave his hands in the air and say the magic words and pray to this God of Israel and cure the leprosy, in person. Naaman could have washed in his own rivers, bigger rivers, cleaner rivers.

Everybody's an expert when it comes to religion, especially when we're talking about a rival religion. Fortunately, the one thing Naaman has done right is to hire good servants. The little girl back home put him on to the prophet of Israel. Now, the servant traveling with him points out that if Elisha had challenged his master with some difficult trial, the old soldier would have jumped on it in a flash. Why not indulge the prophet and do what he says?

So, the great general wades waist deep into the Jordan River and kneels down to immerse himself seven times. When he finally comes back on the bank that last time, he has the pink, smooth complexion of a little boy.

The great Commander had a new heart committed to the Lord. "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel." But, look at the rest of that sentence: "Please accept a present from your servant." He had found the right God, the only God, but not the right attitude. He wanted to pay for his new skin and perhaps for his new faith perhaps the way we'd pay for a face lift or a knee replacement.

Imagine the good things Elisha could have done with that money. The gifts translate into 600 pounds of silver and two hundred pounds of gold. At today's prices of over \$1200/ oz that's \$2 million in gold alone. Elisha could have built two Kirk Halls. But money wasn't the point. It never is. What mattered was the inner change, a slow transformation only beginning with clear skin, a reorientation of his loyalties.

Naaman could not pay for the grace of healing. He could, however, ask for one more thing. He asks to load two of his mules with the dirt of Israel. When he returns to pagan Aram, he will have some of the soil given to the Hebrews by the Lord God Almighty. The idolatry of Aram will be confronted, literally, by the Promise Land. And there is one more confrontation. Because he is the servant of the king of Aram, Naaman will offer his arm to the king in the temple of the idol Rimmon. When the king bows down to the idol, Naaman

will also bow down out of necessity. "Pardon you servant on this one count," he begs of Elisha. Pardon my multiple loyalties, my divided faith.

We all have divided loyalties because we make many commitments, imagining that we will be able to fit them all together in a life of integrity. Often we can, but not always. The soldier accepts his commission and commits himself to a military career. But when he marries, his patriotism and his marriage create friction in his life. Any career can present temptations to violate our values in order to advance. One reason we celebrate Independence Day is to remind ourselves that citizenship in the United States carries obligations and responsibilities. I suspect the king of Aram wanted his top general by his side in the temple of Rimmon as one more assurance that they were always on the same page, always on the same side.

Deep in his soul, Naaman knew that professing belief and trust in no other God except the God of Israel meant that some day he might have to choose the Lord over Rimmon. Professing belief in Jesus Christ puts us in the risky position of some day having to choose Christ over the lesser gods of career and security and pleasure, even commitments we take for granted as the American way of life. The leaders of the early church argued in letters to their Roman masters that Christians make the best Roman subjects. I think it's still true that Christian values best uphold American life. It is our Christian commitment that has priority because there is no other

God except the God of Israel, the One God who saves us in Christ.

So on this Fourth of July, I have a lot of sympathy for Naaman. We cannot pay for the blessings of liberty we have been given. We can acknowledge in worship that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the truest source of these blessings. And, we therefore give our best to the kingdom of God.