

“The Big Dipper”
2 Kings 5:1-14

Passengers on a plane were instructed to fasten their seatbelts immediately. Everyone complied but the great boxer, Muhammad Ali. Noticing this, the flight attendant approached him and requested that he observe the captain’s order, only to hear Ali audaciously respond, “Superman don’t need no seatbelt.” The flight attendant did not miss a beat and replied, “Superman don’t need no airplane either.”

This was the lesson that Naaman from our Bible story had to learn. Naaman was an army general from a powerful empire, Aram. He was the commander of a great army that conquered many of the nations around them, including Israel (1 Kings 22:29-36). He was a rising star that seemed to have it all. Yet, he, like the rest of humanity, had to learn that he was vulnerable. He had a skin disease that made him unclean in the eyes of many. He had some form of skin disease that he could not hide. During that time and in that culture a skin disease was a major source of embarrassment because of its contagious nature. People with skin diseases were normally treated as outcasts and separated from the rest of the community as a form of quarantine. So, here is a powerful general with a lot of authority and reach but who is also helpless to find a cure for his disease. Naaman had to rely on the words of a slave Hebrew girl that worked for his wife and who was captured during one of his military raids on Israel. He had to go seeking healing from a foreign prophet, a prophet who was from the people of his enemies, a lesser nation. What is worse is that when Naaman goes to Elisha the prophet, Elisha does not go out to meet him. In fact, Elisha only sends him a message through one of the servants. Even the message was offensive because Naaman is asked to wash himself seven times in the Jordan River. This Jordan River was in the land of the enemy and it was not better than the rivers they had in Syria. All of this was turning Naaman’s world of power upside down. All of this was expanding Naaman’s horizons to see God in other people, even in the religion and land of the enemy. Dipping his body seven times in the Jordan River, Naaman had to learn to be a big dipper in God’s grace.

The same lesson was being taught also to the people of Israel. Elisha’s action of extending healing to a Syrian army general was very radical for his time. It would be like having the head of the Taliban come to us asking for healing prayer. Clearly Naaman was the enemy. He was on the other side of the people of Israel. He was not to be trusted and not be loved. Certainly healing was out of the question. Elisha was the prophet for Israel. His work was focused on his people. The message of God was given to him to give to his people, the people of Israel and not the people of Syria. On top of all of the political division that existed between the people of Elisha and the people of Naaman, there was the religious divide. Naaman was a worshipper of Rimmon. He was of a different religion and even after he was healed and experienced God through the ministry of Elisha, he was going to go back to worshipping in the way of his own people. What is amazing is that when Naaman shares his dilemma with Elisha is that the prophet of Israel simply says to him, “Go in Peace.” He does not say to him, “Oh, you must become a Jew like us.” He does not expect him to abandon his people and his religion. On the contrary, Elisha blessed Naaman to practice his religion without worrying about offending the God who healed him.

The story challenges so many of our assumptions. It is one of those very important stories in the Hebrew Bible which Jesus even lifts up in his ministry and teaching. In Luke 4:27 we find Jesus directly quoting this story as a teaching lesson to his people challenging them about their narrow mindedness about God. This story challenges our way of thinking of power and wealth. God over and over again in the witness of the scripture works through those who are considered

powerless: The slave girl, the outsider, and the servants. The kings of Aram and Israel are both helpless in finding healing. Naaman's healing took place outside the halls of power. This is especially important for us today on the 4th of July. As we celebrate our independence as a nation, we can see that the health of our country does not always depend on the power brokers. God is at work through those who are considered vulnerable and powerless and we need to pay attention to that.

This story also challenges us about our definitions of who is an enemy and who is a friend, who is deserving of God's grace and who is not. God's love cannot be limited to one group or another. The challenge is of course when we are called to be instruments of God's love to those whom we label as the enemy. Think about the enemies we have, both as individuals and as a community. Are we willing to be instruments of God's love for them? Can we really believe this business of loving our enemies? Can our practical minds get along with such a concept? This story challenges us to open our minds and hearts to people of other faith traditions. Elisha did not demand conversion out of Naaman. He shared God's grace freely with him. This is because Elisha knew that God is not limited to one understanding. The mystery of God's presence in our lives cannot be quantified and limited to one way of expression or religion. And ultimately what matters is that we know God's presence in our lives because that is what truly transforms our lives. Our ideas and definitions of God rarely change us, but our love for God can change the world.

We are living in a time in our world where more and more people are realizing that faith in God is more than just a set of beliefs. It is about our experience of God's presence which is accessible to all of us and not just those with the so-called right belief system. In his book, *The Future of Faith*, Harvey Cox notes that the faith of the early Christians was oriented around a hope for a new world of shalom which Jesus embodies. Their emphasis was on community rather than creeds or clergy. The first three centuries of Christianity demonstrated theological variety, spiritual fellowship, and an anti-imperial stance. All of that changed in what Cox calls "The Age of Belief" from the fourth to the twentieth century when faith became identified with creeds, orthodoxy and "correct doctrine." This resulted in the glorification of bishops and church corruption. Cox says that we are now living in "The Age of the Spirit," which began 50 years ago and is continuing now to shake the foundations of the previous era of hierarchical, patriarchal, and institutionalized religion. Cox says that all the religions of the world are undergoing reforms. In general, religious people are becoming "less dogmatic and more practical. . . more interested in ethical guidelines and spiritual disciplines than in doctrine." All these are positive signs that the future of faith is open to the Spirit of God.

I believe that the Spirit of God which guided people like Elisha in the past to cross the barriers of religion, culture, and politics is helping us today to be more open to God's presence and work in all of the world around us. This does not mean that our beliefs and doctrines are unimportant. What it means is that we hold them in a relaxed manner knowing that they are not God. They are only expressions and ideas about God and they can only guide us on the path of faith but they can't be the destination of our faith. If faith does not help us become more open to the world and its peoples, then we can be sure that it is not inspired by God's expansive Spirit. That is when we know that faith has become only inspired by our ideologies and provincial preferences. If our faith only guides us to love one people, one country, one culture, one religion and hate all the rest, then we need to allow the witness of Elisha and Jesus to challenge us again about loving our enemies and seeing God in the stranger.

In his book, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, Charles Kimball writes, "Whatever religious people may say about their love of God or the mandates of their religion, when their behavior toward others is violent and destructive, when it causes suffering among their neighbors, you can be sure the religion has been corrupted and reform is desperately needed. When religion becomes evil, these corruptions are always present." Kimball lists five warning signs that a religion has been corrupted. When one or more of these signs are present, religion has the potential to become evil. Here are the five warning signs:

- 1) Absolute Truth Claims
- 2) Blind Obedience
- 3) The Establishment of an "Ideal" Time
- 4) The Ends Justify Any Means
- 5) Declaring Holy War

This is when religion becomes more a teaching that is based on fear of the other or on a sense of superiority that we are right and they are wrong.

The story of Elisha and Naaman today is a strong call away from a mentality of fear of the "other." It is a story that helps us see how faith in fact can help us move into the spaciousness and unconditional grace of God's love even when it is tough or costly for us.

The story is told that Abraham Lincoln was once asked what he thought about a politician who had ridiculed him unmercifully. Lincoln was very complementary. The questioner expressed surprise that Lincoln would be positive about a man who had such hostile feelings toward him. "Do you know what he says about you, Mr. President?" Lincoln calmly responded, 'You didn't ask what he thinks about me. You asked what I thought about him. I think he's a good man.' Elisha, Naaman and Jesus show us that our love for God will lead us to love our enemies and even to see God in those who are different from us. Are we ready for this incredible challenge? Are we ready to be big dippers in God's grace? Amen.