

St. Andrew Presbyterian
2010

July 4,

Albuquerque, NM
Yates

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A FOREIGNER IN NEED

II Kings 5: 1-19

This is a story about a foreigner in need. He was Naaman, a Syrian general who had leprosy. He came across the border to his enemy's land in search of healing and wholeness. Now imagine for a moment if this story had an American context. It would raise a lot of questions for us: How are Americans to feel about a foreign general from a hostile country coming to our shores for advanced medical care? How should we react to this ailing foreign dignitary who has in his entourage an American girl kidnapped and now enslaved? How should we view his not so subtle efforts to bribe a holy man-offering him a vast fortune-to heal him? How should we respond to this foreign general when he makes disparaging comments about our rivers? How should we deal with his rage and fury when he refuses the treatment plan offered to him? How might we understand his profession of faith in our God after he is healed? Especially when he then asks permission and even forgiveness for continuing to worship the foreign gods back in his homeland? How would this "don't ask, don't tell" proviso sit with us?

Problematic questions? Oh, let me count the ways! It's as though the writer of II Kings wanted to make this as thorny and difficult a case as could be imagined. A foreign general hears from his kidnapped slave girl that back in her homeland there is a prophet named Elisha who could heal his leprosy. So the general simply marches across Israel's unsecured border with his armed escort. He has a problem-leprosy-and he thinks he has the solution-money. But Israel's king interprets his request for help as a pretext for war. He tears his clothes in anguish and word gets out to Elisha of this provocation. Elisha then invites the general to his home in Samaria for one reason only: "that Naaman may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." For Elisha, this is an opportunity to testify to these foreigners that God speaks through him, a Jewish prophet. And as we will see, that is precisely the impact this healing has upon this foreigner.

When Naaman arrives at Elisha's house, he is snubbed. Elisha's assistant comes to the door and tells him to dip seven times in the Jordan River. Naaman feels totally disrespected, flies into a rage and scorns the Jordan as a second rate river. Thankfully, this high and mighty general listens to his aides and eventually submits himself to the ritual of cleansing himself in the Jordan. And lo and behold he is healed. He comes out of the waters a new man, his skin restored like that of young boy. Not unlike Jesus long after him, he comes up out of the Jordan a changed man.

Now it really gets interesting. Naaman returns to Elisha who this time receives him. But this prophet of God refuses any payment for services rendered. Then Naaman asks if he could take some of the blessed soil from Israel back to his homeland-perhaps as a visible reminder of his miraculous healing. And then he asks for a special spiritual exemption. Naaman knows that the God of Israel healed him, but he has religious obligations back home. So when he bows before the god Rimmon, he will do so with his fingers crossed. Like many folks in positions of authority, he implies that from now on his public worship will be for show only. Actually, he will always remember that Elisha's God, the God of Israel, healed him and made him whole. Those two mule loads of Israel's soil will always remind him of that. Amazingly, Elisha seems to grant him a special concession with these words, "Go in peace."

If you are looking for a story in the Hebrew Scriptures with twists and turns and total surprises, look no further than II Kings 5! This truly astonishing tale concerns Israel's relationship to the foreigner. Especially a foreigner in need. That was always a contentious issue among the chosen people of God. What about those not chosen, those outside the covenant community? Israel's attitude oscillated from pillar to post-sometimes welcoming, sometimes hostile. Take for the instance the Abraham story. Abraham and Sarah are themselves from a foreign land, Ur of the Chaldees. They are called to come south to a promised land where they will become a great nation. And God also promised that they will become a blessing to all the nations. And thus begins the inherent tension within the children of Abraham. Will they focus on being a great nation within the secure borders of their promised land? Or will they focus on being a blessing to all the nations? That tension never was resolved.

Some 500 years before Jesus Israel was defeated by the Babylonians. Then she came limping back to the rubble that once was Jerusalem. Two attitudes struggled for supremacy. One said circle the

wagons and rid ourselves of all foreign influences, just as Joshua had tried to exterminate all the Canaanites living in the Promised Land. So Ezra and Nehemiah insisted that all foreign wives and their children be expelled from the covenant community. Talk about a poignant moment when families were separated and forever broken apart, a bitter kind of ethnic cleansing.

The other side of that equation came from the author of the book of Ruth. In that beautiful tale a Moabite woman, a foreigner indeed, ends up becoming the great-grandmother of David, Israel's greatest king. The message seems to be welcome the foreigner and thus benefit from their gifts to Israel.

At the time of Jesus, that struggle continued. Some in Israel found all foreigners inherently unclean, indeed, a temptation to heresy and apostasy. Others understood that Israel was to be a light to the nations. Think of Jesus' personal openness toward Samaritans, whom most strict Jews detested. Who can forget Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well and his story of the Good Samaritan? Then the risen Christ charged his disciples to go into all the world with the good news. Paul understood well the mind of Christ in bringing the Good News of Jesus to the foreigner, the Gentile, the one outside the chosen people. Paul insisted that the promises of God extended to all people. The early church brought the light of God's love to all people.

On this July 4th, our nation again remembers and celebrates our roots. We are indeed a nation of immigrants. Once we were all foreigners to the native peoples who first inhabited these shores. And throughout our nation's life we have mirrored Israel's attitude toward the foreigner. At times we have welcomed "those huddled masses yearning to be free." At other times we have rejected the foreigner as a threat, even an enemy. We know our history, oscillating back and forth primarily because of changing economic conditions. Welcoming the foreigner when the going was good and blocking the foreigner when times were tough.

I read with interest President Obama's call for immigration reform this past week. I think his plan holds real promise for our nation, a plan that seeks to balance many factors: a need for securing our borders and establishing appropriate criteria for citizenship; holding businesses accountable for fair dealings with immigrants; holding illegal immigrants accountable as well as providing a pathway for legal status; and reforming our incredibly cumbersome immigration process. The devil of course is in

the details. Our political system needs to struggle mightily to hammer out a just and equitable immigration policy. And I do hope that our Republican friends remember that President Bush not long ago proposed immigration reform that is in fact quite similar to that of President Obama's.

Whatever happens in the political arena, one thing we can never forget in the Body of Christ is this: here the foreigner is always welcome, especially the foreigner in need. Why? Because the Body of Christ is an international fellowship of those whose hearts have been captured by Jesus Christ. Here there is no Jew or Gentile, foreigner or stranger. Here one and only one designation that matters—we are simply brothers and sisters for whom Christ died. In the church of Jesus Christ there is no east or west or north or south. There is only one great fellowship of love. We must never circle the wagon at this table of reconciliation. Here we join hands and pass the peace of Christ. Bread is broken and the cup is poured for all of God's children. At this, the table of our Risen Lord!