

Sermon Notes for July 4, 2010
Church of the Crossroads, Honolulu, Hawaii
Scripture: 2 Kings 5:1-14
Sermon Title: "K.I.S.S."
Rev. Kyle Ann Lovett

"A strong nation, like a strong person, can afford to be gentle, firm, thoughtful, and restrained. It can afford to extend a helping hand to others. It is a weak nation, like a weak person, that must behave with bluster and boasting and rashness and other signs of insecurity."

~ Jimmy Carter, 39th U.S. President

Introduction

One of the church folk working in the office this week saw the sermon title in the bulletin and exclaimed, "Oh, good! 'Keep It Short, Sweetie!'"

I had actually been thinking in terms of "Keep It Simple, uh... uh... Sweetie!"

Okay, let's see how we do with that...

Context for the Naaman Story

The story of Naaman and Elisha is anything but simple, really. Naaman is a commander of the army of Aram, a

country that borders Israel, the Northern Kingdom. The relationship is not a good one.

The Arameans lived in southern Syria in the area around Damascus and against the mountains of Lebanon along the northern borders of Israel. King David had defeated the Arameans, but their city-state of Damascus won its freedom from Solomon. They then became persistent opponents of Israel until the late 8th century BCE when they were overrun by the invading Assyrians.

While the king of Israel whose ire was raised to such extremes by the letter from the king of Aram is not identified¹, he is believed to have been Jehoram who, during his short reign of ca. 849-842 BCE, was engaged in frequent wars with neighboring countries of Aram to the north, Moab to the east, and Edom to the south. The present hostility of modern Syria and Israel, based on mutual threat to each other's existence, has a long, biblically-sanctioned history, especially for the fundamentalists of both Judaism and Islam.²

So, if a neighboring ruler sends one of his military commanders to a country, with the request that the

¹ vs.7

² David Shearman, in Midrash

leader of the other country heal the military leader of what was considered to be an incurable - and horribly disfiguring - disease and, in Israel's case, a disease that renders the sufferer and anyone who touches him ritually unclean and unable to participate in the religious rituals....

Well, that kind of reads like a set-up. What's the Israelite ruler to do? If he doesn't heal the other country's military leader, maybe that country's king will be angry and make war. Wars were (and are) fought over petty insults exchanged at high levels. If the disease is considered incurable and too awful for consideration, then the Israelite king's tearing of his clothes makes sense.

One tore one's clothes to indicate mourning. The Israelite king is mourning in advance the loss of life and the destruction that will be caused by his inability to cure Naaman's leprosy.

How Does That Apply to Our Lives?

Today is the 4th of July, Independence Day for the United States of America. We celebrate today the *specialness* of our nation, our country, above all other countries. Is what we're doing Nationalism? Patriotism? National Exceptionalism?

Most of the time we do think we're pretty special. Heck, we know we're special. We're the wealthiest country on the planet. We have the most freedoms - individually and in groups of choosing, affinity groups of free association. We have the most affluent living, even for those living in poverty in this great nation.

Naaman thought he was pretty special.

Naaman thinks he is somebody. And he is. But Naaman thinks Israel is nothing, that his own country is superior in every way. Naaman believes in national exceptionalism. Yet he can find no cure in his own country.

Naaman is miffed (substitute your own word) first because he feels snubbed by the prophet Elisha, who sends his servant with a message instead of tending to Naaman

personally; and then by the suggestion that he should wash in an inferior river in an inferior country.³

All that's insulting to someone of Naaman's stature!

Again and again the Us versus Them ideas that are central to our religious heritage are picked at by our own scriptures!

The story of Naaman, commander of the Aramean army, being cured of leprosy through Elisha, the prophet, is one of those graphic Bible stories often told to children with the added moral about the virtues of obedience.

Naaman's cure is actually one of a number of examples in the Hebrew scriptures of God's gracious concern for non-Israelites. Even the Gospel of Luke has Jesus saying that Naaman's cure is just that [an example of God's gracious concern for non-Israelites].⁴

God's gracious concern for non-Israelites gets lived out again and again, as we confront the exclusivity of Substitutionary Atonement Theology, and we challenge Just War theory, and we come face to face with

³ Ron McCreary, Gray Memorial United Methodist Church, Tallahassee, FL, on Midrash

⁴ Luke 4:27

reminders of lands grabbed from local / indigenous inhabitants (North American First Peoples and Hawaiians).

Conclusion

Naaman was told to do something easy, to solve something incredibly hard.

Our chore this 4th of July holiday may well be to do something easy - and monumental - to confront something hard: To be like Naaman and humble ourselves in the face of the preciousness of other nations, other people, other faiths, other claims to being special and chosen. To distinguish between **Patriotism** (love and devotion to one's country,⁵) and **Nationalism** (the chauvinist policy or doctrine of asserting the interests of one's own nation, viewed as separate from the interests of other nations or the common interests of all nations⁶). Simple. And with biblical basis.

⁵ one's fatherland [patris = Gk. for fatherland], wikipedia, etc.

⁶ dictionary.reference.com, etc.

Can we simply say, "Yes, you're right. America is not more special, not more beloved in the eyes of God, than your nation, or any other nation..." ?

Simple words.

Simple words that challenge what we were taught in school, what we sing in patriotic songs, what we probably really, truly believe down in our core. Because we *have* been indoctrinated. And we *can* unlearn and relearn and use our critical thinking skills *and* our hearts of compassion to hold those learnings, those beliefs, up to the light of scrutiny.

And change. Simple, really. Amen.