

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
July 3, 2016

“The Globalization of Faith”

“... Are not the Abana and Pharpar,
the rivers of Damascus,
better than all the rivers of Israel?”
I Kings 5:12

Prelude

Our scripture lesson this morning relates a fascinating account from the life of Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram (which we would translate as Syria).

Naaman was a mighty warrior
of the highest rank.
He was skilled, accomplished,
said to be “**a great man**” held in “**high favor**”
within the administration in which he served.
Naaman is credited with having orchestrated
the victory which thrust Aram/Syria
to military prominence and political influence
over Israel. Aram was number one; and
Israel was next door, its subdued and
nervous neighbor.

Naaman had rank and honor and
a uniform full of medals that
distinguished him from all others.
He was at the peak of his professional life,
and he benefited from all the perks –
the discount cards, the preferred
parking places, speedy access to
any of the services he wanted.
Yet life for Naaman was troubled,
for he suffered from leprosy.

He possessed so much, he was able to
enjoyed it so little.

He was a contagion, a blemish,
not only in the eyes of others,
but in the mirror of his own eyes.
It was a public humiliation,
a social stigma that everyone
could see, everyone knew, that Naaman
was flawed, not altogether right.

Can you imagine the whispers?

**“There’s the General.
Let’s go see ... get close.
But not too close.
We don’t want what he has.
My goodness, we can see his sin.
He carries death in his body.”**
(see Numbers 12:10-12;
New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol III, p. 193).

A young maid of low rank
who served as an attendant for Naaman’s wife,
became a channel of amazing grace.
She wondered out loud: **If only the General
had access to the prophetic health care
system in Samaria, all would be well;
for there is a prophet in residence there
who no doubt could effect a cure.**

Naaman’s wife reported this to Naaman;
Naaman reported this to the king;
and the king gave leave to the General
to check it out.

The king also issued a letter of recommendation
to the king of Israel – king to king correspondence –
**“take care of my man, Naaman, and rid him of
the disease that disables him.”**

In reading this letter the king of Israel was thrown into a panic – he ripped his robes and bemoaned his plight. He despaired until word reached the prophet Elisha that the king was having a fit from a request he could not grant.

Elisha texted the king –
saying send him to me.
Naaman, with a large entourage,
map quests his way to Elisha.

You might think Elisha would go to meet the great general when he showed up at his doorstep. But no, that wasn't Elisha's style. He simply wrote out the prescription and had an attendant deliver it to the general.

Go, wash in the Jordan (river) seven times; and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean.”

Naaman was enraged by this.

- (1) it fell far short of his expectations (he thought at the very least he might face his physician, and have a little personal prayer time or something);
- (2) he could see no medicinal merit in waters other than his own; he notes a preference for the Syrian water, the rivers Abana and Pharpar.

For a moment we are at an impasse. But servants intervene and prevail upon Naaman to reconsider what Elisha counseled. How simple, to “**Wash, and be clean,**” if only you will.

Naaman did reconsidered.
He went down to the river and did
as Elisha directed.
And he was restored.

This story continues on for the
remainder of chapter 5, II Kings.
The division made in the reading is arbitrary,
a Reader's Digest edit.

We are skipping over significant details -
Naaman had traveled into Israel with a boatload of money,
ten talents of silver (750 lbs.),
six thousand shekels of gold (150 lbs.),
all this to convey - **"lots of money at
play in this General Hospital episode."**

One scholar hastens to counsel -
don't treat this as a healing story in and of itself -
it is so much more, with attention about
who displays faith, and
who fails to display faith;
and we see the "outsider" does,
and a well placed "insider," servant of Elisha,
does not. A lead servant of Elisha,
the good guy in this story, proves to be
quite a conspiring scoundrel,
corrupt and without conscience.

I simply want to suggest this morning that
Naaman musters courage, he dips himself
into waters that bring him newness,
that provide him with peace.
He steps beyond the boundaries that define
his nationalistic pride and prejudice,
and obtains a new understanding of the world.
He is able to see that his help has come from
the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth (see Psalm 121:1-2).

It is a hard-earned lesson, but learned it is.
When Naaman rises from the waters of the Jordan,
he is relieved of his leprosy, and he has a new outlook,
a broader understanding of how and who God is using
for our good, our health, our wholeness.

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It is hard to see and understand life beyond
the nativist borders that define our lives.
It is hard to love the stranger,
 the sojourner,
the indigenous located here prior to our coming,
the immigrants who have come after.
We fear, I sense, the altering of what is known
 and familiar,
possibly a distorting or dilution of cultural
 values we highly prize.
We fear, possibly, being strangers in our land.
This fear incites valiant defense and protection
 of our “way of life.”

Growing up in faith requires that we constantly
 enlarge our borders.
As a child I was much aware of who lived in town,
and who lived out of town, who walked to school,
and who road the bus. And who lived on the other
side of the tracks.

Over time, though, I adjusted to those boundaries.
I saw through them. I adjusted my sights and
understandings. The strange had become familiar;
I became acquainted and found
 friends on the “other side.”

Such discoveries are hard earned;
suspicious and fears often impede;
invisible fences (attitudes and prejudices)

mentally erected in our minds,
keep us cornered.

Families set the tone and outlook,
as do churches.

I was indoctrinated in a state rivalry
between Ohioans and those who live “up north.”

I didn't know it was fun.

I learned to sing with gusto:

**“We don't give a damn for
the whole state of Michigan.”**

Didn't matter that I was
conceived, born, weaned, learned to walk
in Michigan.

That was considered a fluke
of bad timing.

But there was a way out of that birther
scandal - adoption - certified by
a bumper sticker that reads:
Buckeye, by the grace of God.

I also learned there wasn't anything
wrong in the state that you couldn't pin
on our neighbors from W. Virginia.

Beyond a state rivalry,
there was regional/sectional rivalry,
harkening back to the dread days
of our nation's civil war,
the great north/south divide
to rid the nation of an economic system
based upon human bondage.

And then there was that river, the Ohio,
“that dark and bloody river,”
in the words of novelist Allen Eckert,
highway for the encounter between
native and immigrant Americans settling
in the land we now call home.

We sing today of love of country.
We stand and salute the flag.
Our hearts flutter. It is very physical,
our reaction to such love deeply seeded.

But we should beware of any love of country
that is blind, dangerous in its ignorance,
especially when it masquerades itself in religious language,
as if God has intent only to
bless us at the experience of so many others.

We should beware of the love of country that is
proud, boastful, easily enraged,
eager to build walls to defend and protect freedoms
the walls deny.

Our faith is suited to live in the tension
that exists between the stirring conceit of
Irving Berlin (God Bless America) ...
and the poignant hope of
Woody Guthrie (This Land is Your Land,
This Land is my Land - the tune
inspired by a Baptist gospel song).
Berlin's composition so grated Guthrie, that
it inspired his alternative anthem,
with original lyrics that posed a question:

*"One bright sunny morning
in the shadow of the steeple,
by the relief office I saw my people.
As they stood hungry,
I stood there wondering
if God Blessed America for me."*

Guthrie's question keeps our faith honest.

We do well to remember,
our Christian faith is a force, not a form;

it is global in dimension, not confined to
any one country.

And we are blessed, not as an end game,
but to be instruments of blessings,
to give as we have received.

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We should not underestimate the changing face
and challenge of the world that exists today.
Record numbers of displaced people are
seeking asylum, the highest total since records began.

The 2015 number: 65.3 million people; of these
it is estimated that 51% are under the age of 18.

Some 172,700 have requested asylum in the U.S.,
the majority said to be in flight from organized crime,
gang violence, cartel activity.

Of these, 32,000 gained what they sought -
dispersed in 28 different countries; the most were
received in Canada, 81%. The rest remain floating in
limbo for lack of welcome.

Nations are stressed and overwhelmed.

Who will open their doors?

Some few do; but a rising tide is cautious
and eager to protect their borders from
unwanted intrusions.

Some would build walls to keep out the unwanted,
an expedient solution to a global problem,
an explicit betrayal of a global faith.

We have seen such sentiment in the
United Kingdom with the Brexit vote;
we don't need to look far within our own state
to see and hear similar things.

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Earlier in our service we sang the song,
“My Country, ‘Tis of Thee.”

It was first sung in the
Park Street Congregational Church, Boston,
July 4, 1832.

It was written by Samuel F. Smith,
a first-year seminarian,
a Baptist by church affiliation.

It is said he felt an
“**impulse to write a patriotic hymn,**”
and acting on that impulse, he grabbed
a piece of scrap paper and within 30 minutes,
scribbled out largely what we sang today.

Smith wrote another verse that same year.
Called “The Morning Light is Breaking.”
I mention this for while he clearly loved his country,
his country did not define or confine his love.
Smith possessed a global faith,
and he expressed it well in his verse:

**“Blessed river of salvation,
Pursue thy onward way;
Flow thou to every nation,
Nor in thy richness stay;
Stay not till all the lowly
Triumphant reach their home;
Stay not till all the holy
Proclaim, ‘The Lord is come!’**

**Flow thou ... flow now;
to every nation.
Stay not ... river of salvation ...
Flow on...**

(Samuel F. Smith, 1808-1895;
Pilgrim Hymnal, No.305, v. 3)

It is said that Smith composed many books and approximately 100 hymns. He knew at least 15 languages; when he turned 86, he began to study Russian.

We who live in such a shadow
should shudder and cringe with remorse
 at how isolated we are,
how fearful we are, how reduced
our vision for living with diversity in these days.

Smith seems to have been aware, there are any number of ways to speak the language of love with which we are charged. His faith was not anchored in state, a nation, or flag; it was anchored in a cross, a Savior, who never spoke a word of English, who lived and died for love of the world.

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In our New Testament scripture, we are charged to be good citizens and to keep the peace, to serve for good; we accept the charge on condition that the nation is not ultimate in our lives. Our citizenship, our commonwealth, is **“in heaven”** (Philippians 3:20); we are seekers of a homeland earth cannot provide (see Hebrews 11:14); wherever we reside, the charge applies: **“honor all people. Love the brothers and sisters in faith. Fear God** (I Peter 2:17).

If we are to be good patriots,
and a respectable people of a global faith,
we would do well to remember this
early Christian standard is still enforced today.

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I'd like to close with words of Emma Lazarus, a sonnet written in 1883, word later engraved in bronze on the Statue of Liberty. Emma saw and spoke of a mighty woman beholding a torch, a Mother of Exiles, whose beacon glows with a world-wide welcome.

**“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the gold door!”**

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*