

Proud To Be Humble

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Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

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Texts - 2 Kings 5, Galatians 6, Luke 10

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson – 2 Kings 5

As the lectionary continues through the books of Kings, just want to make sure you notice a couple of things. Today's story shifts from the prophet Elijah, to his successor the prophet Elisha. And that this is story of things turned around and upside down: God is not on the side of Israel, but of the enemy, the kingdom of Aram; and there is the greatest general of Aram, Naaman, who has the worst of diseases, leprosy. Listen for the word of God. (*Reading of 2 Kings 5*)

I'd just like you to think about this – if someone asked you: “what is baptism?” – how would you answer? What would you say? – there are all sorts of answers – good ones, and bad ones too – but just think about that... “what is baptism?”

But first, let's think about this – let's ask this “what is Naaman's problem?” – I know he has a big problem, he has leprosy – but I mean, ‘what's his problem?’ in the sense of ‘what is he so upset about?’ Naaman has led the defeat of Aram over Israel – the King of Aram sends him to Israel to be healed by the prophet Elisha – Elisha tells Naaman to ‘go wash in the Jordan and you'll be healed’ ...and Naaman goes ballistic! (there's quite a bit more detail and nuance in the story- but that summary will do for now) So - what is Naaman's problem? Well, I think Naaman has a humility problem – that is, he doesn't have enough of it – humility, that is. Naaman is a powerful man – Naaman orders people around – Naaman has favor with the king – seems to be Naaman even has favor with the

LORD. So when Naaman gets the slightest whiff that someone is telling him to do something he doesn't want to do – which is, in this case, being told to dip himself into the cruddy Jordan river in Israel (when everyone knows that the Abana and Pharpar rivers in Damascus put the Jordan river to shame) – then Naaman has a problem. Well, Naaman's servants know how to cajole a man of power throwing a tantrum – but when it comes down to it, they are really telling Naaman to get over it and just do it. And he does – and he is healed – and in the following verses the story actually goes on to tell how Naaman gives thanks to and worships the LORD.

Alright, so this has all been fairly straightforward – and I've said Naaman didn't have enough humility – but then what would be the way to sum up this story: that Naaman learned humility? or that Naaman was humbled? I've been thinking this week that it's important to, and makes a big difference to, focus on humility, rather than being humbled. And here's what I mean: if you talk about someone having humility, that's an admirable, desirable thing; but if you say someone has been humbled, then it has more the sense of someone being pushed down, diminished. That's even more clear when you think of the good sense of saying someone has humility, but then very different when you say someone has been humiliated – shamed, disgraced. Humiliated - humiliation comes from the word humility – but very different things expressed in them.

And here's what I think is important about this – I think the story of Naaman is about humility – a humility that means that Naaman may be a man in charge, but he comes to grips with the reality that he is not in charge of everything; Naaman may know a lot of things, but he bumps up against the truth that he does not know everything. So it takes humility for Naaman, commander of Aram, to listen to Elisha – it's a challenge, but Naaman does, and he is blessed. But that does not mean the conclusion is, 'aha – take that Naaman, you've been humbled, put in your place, humiliated!' No – Naaman is still

a commander – still a man of power – still an Aramean; AND, he has learned humility – the two go together. Humility is not a squashing of the self – humility is the wisdom in the midst of strength to know you don't know it all.

Remember – you're supposed to be thinking about: “what is baptism?” But first let's think for a moment about what's happening in the church in Galatia in 50 CE...– our snapshot today in Galatians 6 says a lot is happening! People are sinning – people are doing good things – people are arguing about theology – people are trying to be true to the Gospel. And in what Paul writes to this community, I would like to assert that it is quite a remarkable study in humility – look at some of the things Paul says: ‘if someone does something wrong, restore that person in gentleness; help one another...and each person must carry their own weight (I love that Paul puts those 2 side by side!); don't be tempted or deceived, that leads to corruption...and keep doing good, work for the good of all; don't let those pushing circumcision bully you!...and here's what I will boast in, the cross of Christ – that is the source of the new creation - focus on that, and peace and mercy be to you.’

It's an intriguing snapshot, and it is, I think another really interesting piece in getting a full picture of humility. Certainly what Paul talks about here doesn't have to do with humbled in the sense of being diminished or humiliated, but it's also the case here that humility doesn't necessarily have to do with being soft-spoken or diminutive – which is often how humility is characterized, as being self-deferential or passive. Now I am not going to try to make the case that the Apostle Paul was a model of humility! - but he does give here an intriguing picture of a community in which there are failures and successes, responsibility and community, disagreements and strong-held convictions – a lot going on, challenging and good – and Paul addresses it all with a spirit of graciousness and encouragement...with a concluding statement that gives the essence of humility: ‘I will

boast only in Christ...for we are a new creation' Here is a humility grounded in giving glory and thanks to God in Christ, which does not quash or humiliate us, but reveals to us all of the goodness of who we are made to be – a new creation. And so here humility is not being quiet about your convictions – it is about living them out from a foundation of gratitude to God that seeks the good of all. Humility is the strength of faith expressed in a spirit of graciousness and service; a strong faith lived out with gentleness, mercy, peace.

Remember – you're supposed to be thinking: "what is baptism?" But last let me just say a bit about what's happening during the life of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke chapter 10... Now, you may wonder incredulously, by what interpretative gymnastics am I going to make a theme of humility fit a passage in which Jesus tells his disciples to wipe the dust off their feet of any towns who don't listen to them...? Well, it's really quite simple – the context of this passage is crucial – just a few verses before in Luke 9 (we read it last week) when some folks don't listen to Jesus, James and John propose reigning down fire on them! – so the wiping off the dust policy here is a significant difference! And it truly can be seen as being part of understanding of humility – because really what Jesus is getting at here is that his followers are simply responsible for witnessing to the kingdom of God, and God will take it from there. It is again not a humility that is diminutive or that downplays the importance of what is at stake – but is a humility that corrects any tendency to be impressed with ourselves as being some sort of in crowd with Jesus. Jesus says to find joy simply in this – that we have been given sight to see the kingdom of God; and to pray for that sight for all.

So then that finally gets us to that question – remember? – 'what is baptism?' So many things to see in the waters of baptism – I was thinking that just as at our Early Worship during the program year we often say meditating on Scripture can always lead us to the table, to communion themes, that could also be said about the sacrament of baptism – God's word always leading us to discover the richness of God's grace present in the font.

And what I hear today in answer to ‘what is baptism?’, is that baptism is an act of humility. It is an act of humility for this community of faithful, committed, gifted, educated, skilled, independent, outspoken people (that’s Hope Church) to say to you, Putzke family: confess with us that we depend on God’s grace; declare that our lives are a gift from God; affirm that we are grateful for God’s saving love; and then to see that such a strong, lively spirit and such humility are of one piece. It is an act of humility for Aaron and Wendy – these good, faithful, competent gifted people to say – please baptize our children – because we can’t do this on our own – we need God’s help, your help; we will falter and need strength, we will succeed and need your affirmation. To seek baptism is the humble wisdom of those who know that life is lived in the realm of God’s grace – that is the strength of humility in these parents. And for Evan and Dannan and Kellen to be baptized today is to mark them with a seal of humility – which has nothing at all to do with humiliating them, quashing their spirits, these lovely children that their parents and we are so proud of and so grateful for. No, baptism is a gift of humility that bathes them in the truth that their lives are a gift from God, and which sustains them to find their gifts and calling and voice and strength as children of God – a new creation; baptism is marking them with a humility which calls them to share this gift and blessing from God with all.

Baptism is an act of humility. There is, you know, the song “O Lord, it’s Hard to Be Humble” (in fact my notes show that I sang it here in a sermon in 2001!) – but I’ve been thinking of a twist on that song “O Lord, I’m Proud to be Humble” – we are boldly marked as humble people - grateful for the wisdom and strength of a humility that turns us again and again and always to the saving love of God in Jesus Christ...who turns us through his Spirit again and again and always to be about the new creation - the humble strength of a faith expressed in a spirit of gentleness, mercy, peace. Thanks be to God.
AMEN.