

Sermon: Working on the Margins

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **2 Kings 5:1-14; Luke 17:11-19**

Some of you may know our cat, Fred, either in person or from social media. Walgreen's pharmacy knows him as Fred Cat Regan. He's a big, lovable lunk of a cat who loves anyone who will give him a belly rub. He does not enjoy the sound of hammers or electric tools, and he has some sort of vendetta against mice. When he gets one in his mouth, he growls like a German Shepherd and good luck getting the mouse away from him.

So far, he sounds like Naaman: a great cat and mighty warrior, in high favor among those with whom he lives. But he has one tiny flaw: he's diabetic. He requires insulin twice a day and a special diet high in protein. The diabetes caused neuralgia in his back legs, but he seems to be recovering from that, if he sticks with his diet, which he despises. We're praying for him.

In the world of people, history is littered with the legacies of flawed leaders. Some, like Winston Churchill, are supremely great at one thing, good at others, and benignly mezza-mezz at the rest. Others are great only in what they attempt to force upon the world, and their flaws are so glaring as to make the rest of us shield our eyes.

We are especially wary of those great men who make war on their neighbors, or, sometimes, on their own people. Alexander Solzhenitsyn once said that "Unlimited power in the hands of limited people always leads to cruelty."

The arrogance and blind ambition of such people drives them to violate borders; turn women and children into victims; and drown out the hopes of millions. Arrogance is not the same as confidence. Arrogance is often driven by fear and weakness.

Unfortunately, the world is a messed-up place; we all know that. It's frustrating to pray for peace on earth and an end to war and conflict without seeing it happen eventually. In times like these, we are right to wonder, as the writer of Psalm 30 did, is God's face hidden from us? Are we reliving some ancient historical pattern without realizing it?

Now let's consider Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, also known as Syria. Oddly enough, by Naaman the LORD had given victory to Syria, an enemy of Israel.

Somehow, for some reason, the victories of a Syrian king were credited to the Israelite God, and not just any victories, but victories against Israel. Food for thought there.

Anyway, like many people throughout history, Naaman may have been great, but he was also unsound; in his case, he suffered from a skin disease. Not the disfiguring leprosy known today as Hansen's Disease, but something unsightly, nonetheless.

In 750 B.C., this sort of thing was seen as being a moral defect, and sometimes caused one to be excluded from the community, so finding a cure was important. Who do you turn to for this sort of thing? The king of Syria knew – and he put it on the king of Israel to figure it out.

The king of Israel thought it was a trick meant to incite a war, and he reacted poorly.

Fortunately, when the prophet Elisha heard of the king's panic, he told him he would take care of it. And he did, but not before Naaman's pride and arrogance, his parochialism, almost derailed the whole thing. "Don't you know who I am?" he complained. Perhaps he still considered Israel the enemy and that he deserved special treatment.

Pride goeth before a fall, as they say, but Naaman's servants managed to calm him down and got him to do what Elisha told him to do. He did, reluctantly, and voilà – his flesh was restored, he was clean again; problem solved.

That's the end of the story as far as the lectionary is concerned. If we had kept reading, we would have learned that Naaman, after converting to Judaism on the spot, tried to pay Elisha, who refused, saying he served God, not men. After that, there's a surprise ending which I will not reveal at this time.

Early on in this passage, did you notice the young girl? She is someone who took it on faith that God's prophet can help even an enemy. She seems to want things to be better for everyone. The fact that she is part of the story shows how God works quietly on the margins.

Which leads us to Jesus and the lepers.

Back at the end of chapter nine, Jesus began his journey to Jerusalem. At his first stop, he was rejected in a Samaritan village. As we read through Luke, it becomes clear that Jesus does not seem to be traveling toward Jerusalem in a straight line. Instead, his winding way takes him through Galilee and sometimes into Samaria until finally, he makes it to Jericho and then on to Jerusalem pretty quickly after that. The point is, he's on the way and doing as much work as he can before he gets there. What's the hurry?

Anyway, Jesus is today somewhere in between Galilee and Samaria, crossing boundaries as he goes. Which makes it hard to tell who in this story is really the foreigner, Jesus or the leper who returns to thank him.

In Kings, a foreigner comes to Israel to be made clean. In Luke, two foreigners meet, and one who is made clean praises God and is made well. Naaman is not explicitly made *well*, but he does acknowledge God as the one God in all the earth. In the end, does it matter if one is a foreigner or not? Does God care as long as faith is involved?

All ten lepers showed some faith simply by going to see the priests, without Jesus touching them or otherwise interacting with them in some miraculous manner. The bottom line here is, they were all made clean and fit for society, proving that even they can be included in Jesus' saving work, just as Naaman was part of Elisha's. But the faith of one blossomed into praise of God and thanks for Jesus.

The passage from Kings was written during the Babylonian Exile, so it may be that the author wanted the displaced Jerusalemites to know that God works even across borders, giving them hope that their situation might someday improve, which it did. This may have been Luke's intent for his audience as well, given the Roman occupation. This is good news for any community in exile.

The good news for Naaman and leper #10 is that their healing enabled them to redirect their lives and faith toward God. Read the surprise ending in Kings.

As for the Samaritan leper, we don't know anything about him. We don't know his values; we don't know his favorite sports teams; nothing. All we know is that he recognized a gift and by whom it was given, and he gave thanks for it. It was impossible for him to withhold his gratitude and he discovered God in his thanksgiving.

The writer Annie Lamott has two favorite prayers: in the morning, "Help, help, help," and in the evening, "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

Works for me. Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

Amen.

Background on Kings

The two books called First and Second Kings were once one scroll, but, as it's a long story, they ended up as two separate books.

Together, they tell the history of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah, from the time of David's death (ca. 970 BCE) to the destruction of Samaria, the capital of Israel, by the Assyrians (721 BCE), followed by the fall of Jerusalem in Judah to Babylon (586 BCE).