

Sermon – “Silence Is Not Spoken Here”

Sunday, July 3, 2016

Scripture Reading - Psalm 30, 2 Kings 5:1-14

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading, Psalm 30, is an ancient song of thanksgiving. The psalmist does not speak the language of silence, and rejoices in the healing he has received from the God who listened when he cried for help. Listen to what the Spirit is saying.

1 I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up, and did not let my foes rejoice over me. 2 O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. 3 O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit. 4 Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. 5 For God's anger is but for a moment; God's favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. 6 As for me, I said in my prosperity, "I shall never be moved." 7 By your favor, O Lord, you had established me as a strong mountain; you hid your face; I was dismayed. 8 To you, O Lord, I cried, and to the Lord I made supplication: 9 "What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness? 10 Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me! O Lord, be my helper!" 11 You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, 12 so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

Our second scripture reading, 2 Kings 5:1-14, relays an event during the time Elisha served as a prophet. The kingdoms of Israel and Syria have existed in an uneasy peace for some years. Today we meet Naaman, a well-respected commander of Syria's army, who finds himself suffering from a debilitating and embarrassing skin disease. Naaman receives guidance from an unexpected voice when a young Israelite servant girl speaks of healing in her homeland. Hear now the Word of God.

1 Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. 2 Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. 3 She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." 4 So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. 5 And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. 6 He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." 7 When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." 8 But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." 9 So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. 10 Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." 11 But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! 12 Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. 13 But his servants approached and

said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, "Wash, and be clean'?" **14** So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

The title of the sermon: "Silence Is Not Spoken Here"

Text: "You have turned my mourning into dancing...so that my soul may praise you and not be silent." Psalm 30:11a, 12a

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, you speak to us in unexpected places and voices. May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you. Amen.

The story of the healing of Naaman is a thoughtful and entertaining drama with a rich cast of characters, a well-developed plot, many ironic twists and turns, comic relief and a keen insight into human flaws. Throughout the story we hear echoes of God's gracious ways working within people's lives in unexpected places and voices.

The first truth spoken subtly in this drama is that no one is exempt from life's hardships and suffering. The rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous, the rich and the poor, the accomplished and the ordinary, regardless of nationality or station in life. We share the frailty of humankind with our brothers and sisters throughout the world. And so in spite of all of Naaman's accomplishments and greatness, he longs for healing.

Ironically, the healing of this "commander of armies" would come by way of an Israelite "servant girl" captured on one of their raids. The captive brings hope to the captor in her willingness to use her voice and speak of a God who heals. It's a simple act of kindness, yet one which took a great deal of courage. She had lost her freedom, yet she had not lost her faith and integrity. She had choices about when to speak and when to keep silent and silence did not speak the day she suggested a prophet in Israel who could heal Naaman.

Naaman is a wise man and listens to his wife when she shares the news from her servant girl. Perhaps this is what made him such a respected commander in the Syrian army...his ability to listen to others. Throughout this drama, Naaman listens to and respects the voice of subordinates. Those with less power, yet more insight; an insight which surely has grown out of their own struggle in an unjust world.

Thanks to his servants who choose to speak, Naaman has the strength to put his ego aside and to follow the simple directions Elisha gave him, even though it feels beneath him. This humility allows God to heal and transform his life...an important reminder not to take ourselves too seriously and to listen to the quiet and understated voices in our lives, which speak the truth and put things into perspective.

Of course, life is never simple and Naaman's journey is not uncomplicated. He follows diplomatic protocol before approaching the King of Israel, arriving with a letter of recommendation... and the bureaucracy begins! A bureaucracy not unlike what so many of us experience today when we seek healing.

Ironically, the king of Israel does not seem to know what the captive slave girl in Damascus knows: that there is a prophet in Samaria who heals. In her precarious situation she sees the possibility; and yet the King, with all his power, sees only the impossible. For the King, it's all about himself, his fear of being manipulated and the expectations he knows he cannot meet. It's always a tragedy when personal egos become obstacles to God's healing power.

Thankfully, silence was not spoken on the day Elisha sent a message to the King of Israel suggesting Naaman come to him. By now, Naaman is rightfully frustrated and feels disrespected by Elisha who does not greet him and requests him to wash himself seven times in the Jordan River. The expectations Naaman had when his journey toward healing began have been disappointed time and time again. He's exhausted, he still has the skin disease, he's been asked to journey yet again to another place, and now his national pride has been offended, adding injury to insult. Why not wash in a river from his own country, which are far superior to the Jordan?

Once again, silence is not spoken as Naaman articulates his anger and frustration on a journey that has gone too long with too many unexpected turns. Thank God for Naaman's voice and complaint! He echoes the ancient psalms of lament in his cry and God hears as God hears each of us when we cry out on our journeys!

Naaman continues his journey to the water's edge of the Jordan where he discovers healing as he washes himself seven times (the number for completion in biblical literature). A picture that is reminiscent of baptism, Jesus' baptism, and each of our baptisms... the cleansing and initiation into the faith community.

And so our story ends in the same way it began, speaking truth about God's inclusivity. Even as none of us is excluded from the hardships and frailty of life, likewise no one is excluded from God's healing grace. Yes, even Naaman, the foreigner who defeated Israel in battle, is restored by Yahweh, the God who heals.

Later, Jesus would point to this story to shed light on the inclusivity of his ministry. In Luke 4:27, we read, "*Just as Elijah ministered to the Phoenician widow of Zarephath, and just as Elisha ministered to Naaman, the Aramean, so, too, Jesus proclaimed good news to the outcasts of Jewish society as well as to some Gentiles,*" ... giving voice to those long silenced.

The metaphor woven throughout this story "silence is not spoken here" comes from a poem written by a young student, Anasuya Sengupta, from Lady Sri Ram College in India. In the poem, which was quoted at the 1995 Women's Rights gathering in Beijing, she articulates women's struggle throughout history for a voice. She writes:

*Too many women
In too many countries
Speak the same language
... of silence.
We seek only to give words
To those who cannot speak...
I seek only to forget
The sorrows of my grandmother's
silence.*

This metaphor echoes what is at the heart of our faith. In the 1991 “Brief Statement of Faith” of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) we affirm:

“In a broken and fearful world the spirit gives courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear voices of people long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.”

As we gather on this Fourth of July weekend and continue our own journeys toward healing in a world divided by religion and prejudice, may we each find our own voice...in words of encouragement and insight, in acts of kindness, in works for justice, freedom and peace... so that it may be said in this time and place - **Silence is not spoken here.** Amen.