

# "Beyond These Walls"

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University Presbyterian Church of Tempe, Arizona

In the first of today's reading, the story of the prophet Elisha, successor to the great prophet Elija, continues from last week. By this time the stories of his miracles have reached far and wide throughout Israel and beyond. In this story we have all the drama of a classic Shakespearean comedy. It is a drama of grace and forgiveness, as well as arrogance and punishment. It contains some comic relief (listen to the king of Israel's response to what he thinks the king of Aram is asking, as well as to what the king of Aram is actually asking and may be provoking). Listen for the insights into the human condition when we hear of not only the king of Israel's response to the king of Aram, but also Naaman's response to Elisha's instructions. If you were asked, where would you put yourself in this comedic drama?

We witness Naaman's arrogance at being told what to do through a Elisha's servant, but also recognize that Naaman is from the country of Aram, or Syria, an enemy of Israel. The king of Israel doesn't know what to make of the king of Aram's request, but guesses that he means to wage war over the king of Israel's inability to cure Naaman. This may be true, that the king of Aram is using this opportunity for just such a thing, but could the king of Israel be responding out of fear? What about the servant girl? What might her story be? How did she come to be in that position? What prompts her to share about Elisha? I invite you to listen for God's Word through 2 Kings 5:

## 2 Kings 5.1-14 (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He

would cure him of his leprosy." <sup>4</sup>So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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." <sup>7</sup>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." <sup>8</sup>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.”

<sup>9</sup>So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha’s house.

<sup>10</sup>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.”

<sup>11</sup>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! <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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’?” <sup>14</sup>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.

We move from this incredible story of reaching beyond our cultural and natural boundaries, where the king of Aram may very well be setting a trap for the king of Israel, and where Elisha pays no attention to the fact that Naaman is not an Israealite, to the Apostle Paul writing to one of the churches he founded and struggling to quell their own struggle with insiders and outsiders. The primary focus here is the Jewish rites like circumcision as a sign and symbol of God’s covenant and inclusion into the family, especially for non-Jewish converts, or Gentiles. Again, the question here is: who is in and who is out? Paul tries to convince his still infant congregations that they are asking the wrong the questions. Earlier in his letter he argues that most of them are not Jewish by birth, and so, therefore, shouldn’t even be allowed to consider themselves Christians, according to the letter of the law. We surmise from his arguments that at least some of the Galatian churches are attracted to the perceived clarity of the law. But then he goes on to try and open their eyes to the reality that the law is confinement that excludes them from the covenant to which God had invited them through Jesus. Jesus came to set us free from the bonds of the law, which is what the law originally was intended to do but became corrupted. He goes on to offer them a different kind of vision for community, a community lived in love of God’s Spirit, and a community that asks completely different questions than who is in and who is out, for in Jesus, everyone is in and everyone takes responsibility for one another, even across communal or cultural boundaries. He tries to encourage the churches not to compete for some “holiness” trophy, but to treat each other as sisters and brothers, supporting one another and holding one another accountable to the teachings of Jesus but in love, not in judgment. So, as we read this text, I invite us all to listen to Paul’s encouragement to love one another through difficult times.

## Galatians 6.1-16 (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup>My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. <sup>2</sup>Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. <sup>3</sup>For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. <sup>4</sup>All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. <sup>5</sup>For all must carry their own loads. <sup>6</sup>Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher. <sup>7</sup>Do not be deceived;

God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. <sup>8</sup>If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. <sup>9</sup>So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. <sup>10</sup>So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

<sup>11</sup>See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!

<sup>12</sup>It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised —

only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.

<sup>13</sup>Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh.

<sup>14</sup>May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

<sup>15</sup>For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! <sup>16</sup>As for those who will follow this rule — peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.

Both these texts share a common thread: we are prone to want to label people because that is just easier than trying to understand that each of us is complex. When we are able to throw a label over someone or a group of someones, it's easier for us to either welcome them and ignore their flaws, or ignore them and cast them away despite their inherent God-given value. When we look upon each individual as an individual child of God, complex and full of flaws and paradox, it forces us to have to take the time to get to know them as a person, and who has time for that!

Naaman was the enemy. But Elisha offers him hope if he can humble his own grandiose ego enough to listen. He finally does, and not only is he healed, he has gained a new insight to his supposed enemy, and even more than that has gained a friend in Elisha, across those lines we so often arbitrarily draw. But this is also about all the expectations of civil society being thrown upside down. It is the lowly servant girl who brings news of salvation and hope, not the king of Israel who rips his close in fear. It is the prophet of the tiny kingdom of Israel who is the conduit of God's healing transformation—for Naaman was more than physically healed, his heart is changed as well as his life forever.

Paul sees the divisions among the various churches in Galatia and quickly realizes that they are not seeing one another as people, but as competitors in the game of who can be the

most righteous and holy. In other words, who is in and who is out. Paul tries to convince the churches of Galatia that that is not what Jesus' ministry was about. Jesus came to bring freedom from these false boundaries that we draw among ourselves, and invites us to see one another not by the labels we give each other but by through the lens of God's love and compassion, in keeping with one of many constant threads that hold together the Biblical witness is that those who we perceive to be our enemies are really our sisters and brothers. Those with whom we disagree or who live differently than we do have the most to teach us. It raises questions about the lines and walls that we unconsciously build to protect ourselves from the things that we fear, namely other people who are not like me, who think, act, live, and look not like me: people whose skin looks different than mine; people who worship differently than me; people who love differently than me (whether those people be Muslim, Catholic, or another flavor of protestant; whether they be from another country than my ancestors or drawn to love those I cannot love; whether they homosexual or heterosexual, black, white or brown, speak with accent that is unfamiliar or all too familiar, drive a nice car or a car that is beat up and in desperate need of an oil change, or shop at certain stores where I would not dare go).

The whole Biblical witness is telling us that God is calling us to step out in trust, that what is out there beyond our lines, walls, and near-sided vision is the great diversity of God's good, dangerous and wonderful creation. We are being called to look and go beyond in order to seek out and build relationships with those who are different so we might learn not only about them, but grow deeper in our own understanding of what the Holy One is doing in us and around us and is calling us to be. You see, the more we reach out, the more we grow to understand what God's kingdom is really all about. And then no longer do we feel the need to compete with one another, or use one another to get ahead. What we want becomes shaped and reshaped by what God wants, and slowly but surely we begin to live in the kingdom of God here and now, where people are received and accepted for who they are in God's eyes, rather than our fearful and jaded eyes. We are no longer jealous or fearful of the church down the street who is doing things differently, but welcome them as sisters and brothers with as much a partial vision of God's kingdom as our own, but doing their best just as we are trying to do our best.

When I first came here I was told that I need to continue saying something that previous pastors had been saying at the end of each service: "University Presbyterian Church is an open and affirming community." Has anyone noticed what I've done with that? I've tweaked it a bit, in hopes that it speaks to a clearer reality of who we are and who we are trying to be. I've added the words, "seeks to be". Three little words that speak volumes about the fact that we are on a journey without a clear destination but lots of things to see and experience along the way. We are seeking to learn, seeking to grow, and seeking to be. We may never get there, but we are continuing to seek, trusting that God's Holy Spirit will continue to guide us and encourage us. "University Presbyterian Church seeks to be an opening and affirming community," because that is what God is calling us to do and be. And with that comes the heavy responsibility of looking at others differently than the world might see them, and seeking to somehow build a relationship in the midst of all the frailties of human fear, and celebrating all that humanity can be as we try to see ourselves through the lens of God's vision and insight. And may God continue to show us the way, pushing and stretching our imaginations to see the truth as much as we are able.