

6th<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost July 4, 2010 2Kings 5:1-14; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20; Galatians 6:1-5, 9-10

One of the best things about getting an email from Orion is that he always has a good quote at the bottom of his message. Did you notice the one he has up now – or at least until Friday? It's a quote from George Bernard Shaw that goes: *Independence . . . is middle-class blasphemy. We are all dependent on one another, every soul of us on earth.*

That's a good one. And it's right in line with others who have something to say to us on this historic Independence Day. The article that I quoted from in *Keeping in Touch* is called *Celebrating Interdependence Day*. The authors say:

“Independence is overrated and more than that it is a myth. We are all utterly *interdependent* beings from birth to death. We could not survive without microbes that help build our soil and the plants and trees that create oxygen and offer us food; we would never become mature adults without teachers and mentors; our cities would be full of disease if we didn't have people who collect our garbage. More than *Independence Day* we need an *Interdependence Day* to celebrate our dependence upon one another and the earth, and our ultimate dependence upon God.” A wordier saying than Shaw's!

Personally, I don't think there's anything wrong with *Independence Day*. As Americans, we celebrate the birth of our nation and its continuing story, as well as the gifts we enjoy as citizens. As long as we don't take it too far. Our citizenship is, after all, penultimate; our ultimate loyalty is to the realm of God

For example, in his book *The Legacy of the Second World War*, historian John Lukacs honors patriotism but warns of nationalism. Many aspects of patriotism are natural, good, and admirable. But, he said, there's also a toxic patriotism, or nationalism, that is the belief that my nation is "superior to all others." He told the story of C.S. Lewis' encounter with a British pastor who espoused this brand of nationalism and asked him, "Doesn't every nation think of itself as the best?" The pastor responded in all seriousness, "Yes, but in England it is true." Like: "My country right or wrong."

Lewis' take on the episode was: "To be sure, this conviction had not made my friend a villain; only an extremely lovable old ass. It can however produce asses that kick and bite. On the lunatic fringe it may shade off into that popular Racialism which Christianity and science equally forbid."

Going back thousands of years, the reading from 2 Kings illustrates. The story appears to be about a healing done by the prophet Elisha. But there are some interesting twists and turns. Naaman, the one healed, is a foreigner, and not just any foreigner, an Aramean, Israel's arch enemy. In today's geographic configuration, we'd call him a Syrian. So as far as enemies go in the Middle East, things haven't changed too much between Israel and Syria. Naaman is also a very powerful Aramean; he is the commander of the Aramean armed forces (think David Petraeus, commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan).

Naaman is a powerful enemy. Naaman also has leprosy. And we heard the story of how he was healed by Elisha, the prophet of his enemy, Israel. What happens next isn't in our reading, but here's the end of the story. Elisha's servant, Gehazi, thinks that Elisha let this foreigner off way too easy. He runs after Naaman and feeds him a story about Elisha needing money and clothing for some newly arrived prophets. Naaman pays up willingly, not realizing that he's being scammed. Elisha, however, does know. And when he questions Gehazi, and the servant lies, the prophet pronounces his punishment: "The leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you, and to your descendants forever." But here's the thing: it's not the lie that brings the curse. Rather, it is that Gehazi scammed a foreigner. For this, Gehazi receives the leprosy of Naaman, and the story comes full circle and upside down. The outsider is blessed, the insider is cursed.

When this text appears on July 4, we can see the intersection of this ancient tale with our national story today. God does not respect the boundaries that we put up – either around our geographical territories or around God's love and healing compassion. God's vision of *shalom* is for everyone and everyone is connected in a great *interdependent* of life and love.

So how does this impact how we celebrate this holiday? If you've read *Keeping in Touch*, you've seen part of the list of 40 Ways to Celebrate Our Interdependence, which, if you read all of them, are all about building relationships among people – family, neighbors, old, young. And for getting out and doing something that benefits everyone, even if it's just your neighborhood (or a *Welcome* gardening day). A side note is that if you went to the link I gave in KIT, you saw the author is Shane Claiborne, one of the speakers at the *Emerging Church* conference that some of us attended. Shane is a founding partner of the *Simple Way* community, a radical faith community that lives among and serves the homeless in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia and the co-author of *Jesus for President*. He, too, has editorial comments about looking at Independence Day through a different lens. It doesn't mean we throw out the old lenses, but we can take a look through new ones too.

And so there are some spiritual practices that might help us place our national celebration in light of the God's present and future vision for our nation and the earth.

First, for Christians, the Fourth of July should be a day of prayer for our national leaders, all our leaders, whether we agree with them or not. Our prayer should be that they seek wisdom over personal gain or gain for only some. In this time of culture wars and national division, we can pray, not simply *God Bless America*, but for openness to God's wisdom and healing, to commitment to dialogue, to truth telling, and to our common life and cause.

Secondly, on this day we should affirm the diversity of our nation as a blessing and gift. All of us, including Native Americans, came from someplace else. And affirming diversity in ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, is at the heart of our nation's ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This is no time to be circling the wagons around "me and mine."

We must also affirm global interdependence. National sovereignty is important, as is national security. We're not naïve; we should be protected from aggressors. But we are not alone in this world, not independent players on the world stage. We are part of a community of nations, each of which is loved by the Creator, even when its leaders or its people go against the vision of shalom.

And other people love their countries as much as we love ours. We are not unique in our love of our land; we share this even with our enemies, our Arameans. Like Elisha's servant, Gehazi, we need to have less parochialism in our national life. We need to make a commitment to world loyalty as well as national loyalty. The prophetic tradition and the teachings of Jesus call us beyond our borders. Our love of our country calls us to be partners in a greater cause -- especially in light of global climate change, oil spills, and natural disasters -- to be God's partners in healing the earth.

A global vision demands that we care for every country and people as much as we do our own. Just one example of where this plays out is our problem with 12 million illegal immigrants. It's a complicated situation, and no obvious solution is forthcoming. But while politicians blame each other to score political points, we would do well to recall God's words to ancient Israel from Leviticus: "When aliens live with you in your land, do not mistreat them. The aliens living with you must be treated as your own native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God." If we're going to quote laws from Leviticus about sexual behavior, let's also pay attention to this one.

The bottom line is this: the wisdom of God recognizes a wider world than we, with our limited imaginations, can even envision. However, on this Independence Day, we are given the opportunity to imagine a truly lived-out, *interdependent* world, to pray for it – and then work for the "impossible possibility" of justice, planetary health, and God's shalom.

Amen

## 2 Kings 5:1-14

*Like so many stories in the Bible, the story of Naaman is about power. But it's about "little" people, too, the ones who are so often missed in the larger scheme of things, especially in the way history is written. It is also about freedom, an apt subject on this Fourth of July. The little people in this story make it move, make things happen, so, in some interesting way, they have their own great power. Or, if they don't have the power, they at least don't stand in its way, as Naaman and the kings seem to do.*

Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great officer man and highly esteemed. It was at Naaman's hand that God gave a victory to Aram. He was a mighty warrior. And he had leprosy. On one of their raids the Arameans captured a young girl from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. One day she said to her mistress, "If only Naaman would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure his leprosy."

So Naaman went to the king and told him just what the Israelite girl had said.

"By all means, go," the king replied, "I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of clothing.

The letter that he took to the king of Israel read, "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy."

As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, "Am I God?! Can I give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?! See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!"

When Elisha the prophet of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your robes? Have Naaman come to me, and he will learn that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman went with his horses and chariots, and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a message to the warrior, saying, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed."

But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me, and stand before me, calling on the name of YHWH and wave his hand over the spot, and cure me of my leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them, and be cleansed?" So he turned and went away in a rage.

But his servants went to him and said, "Sir, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash, and be cleansed'?"

So Naaman went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, as the prophet of God told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

## Galatians 6:1-5, 9-10

*Paul's vision of a community of mutual caring, in which the Spirit inspires persons to bear one another's burdens and manifest a "spirit of gentleness" in calling transgressors to account can be easily related to the gospel vision of a present Rule of God in which God's shalom is beginning to be operative.*

Sisters and brothers, if one of you is caught in any sin, you who have received the Spirit should correct the offender in a spirit of gentleness – remembering that you may be tempted yourselves. Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ. But if you think you are important when you are not, you are deceiving yourselves. Examine your own work, each of you. If you find something to boast about, at least it is something of your own and not just empty comparison with your neighbor. Carry your own load! Never grow tired of doing good. We will reap a harvest at the proper time, if we do not grow weary. So, while we still have time, do good to all, and especially to those of the family of faith.

## Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

*Jesus' followers are to go out into the world with no safety net. They (we) are to be persons on the move, alive*

*to the present moment in all of its possibilities, positive and negative. In all things, what is needed is a new creation, that is, dynamism to match the world which is evolving, and dynamism that inspires us to go beyond the world as it is to the world that God imagines for us. Our names are "written in heaven" for God will never forsake us, but will provide possibilities for growth and healing every step of the way.*

After this, Jesus appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead in pairs to every town and place he intended to visit. He said to them, "The harvest is rich, but the workers are few; therefore, ask the overseer to send workers to the harvest.

"Be on your way, and remember: I am sending you as lambs in the midst of wolves. Do not carry a walking stick or knapsack; wear no sandals; and greet no one on along the way. And whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace be upon this house!' If the people live peaceably there, your peace will rest on them; if not, it will return to you. Stay in that house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not keep moving from house to house.

"And whatever city you enter, after they welcome you, eat what they set before you and heal those who are sick in that town. Say to them, 'The reign of God has drawn near to you.' If the people of any town you enter do not welcome you, go into its streets and say, 'We shake the dust of this town from our feet as testimony against you. But know that the reign of God has come near.'

"Anyone who listens to you listens to me. Anyone who rejects you rejects me, and those who reject me reject the One who sent me."

The seventy disciples returned with joy, saying, "Rabbi, even the demons obey us in your name!"

Jesus replied, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like lightning. Look, I have given you the power to tread on snakes and scorpions – even all the forces of the enemy - and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in the fact that the spirits obey you so much as that your names are written in heaven."