

sermon-2/15/09 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“Crossing Boundaries”  
II Kings 5:1-14  
By Jim Patten

Jesus loved the story of Naaman’s healing and it almost got him killed. If you read Luke, chapter four, you will hear Jesus’ first sermon back in his home town of Nazareth. At first they are a bit surprised at what Jesus says, but they are impressed. And then he crosses a boundary. He wants to make the point that God’s love knows no boundaries. God loves all people, even our enemies. To prove that he mentions this story in II Kings.

Naaman was an Aramean, or what we would call today a Syrian. Aram was an enemy state. At the time of this story, it was a superior power to Israel. We know from the story that Naaman had entered Israel and taken people captive, including the slave girl in his home.

Jesus’ contemporaries could not stand to hear that God loves all people. They hated their occupier, Rome, and hoped that God would destroy that evil empire, or at least let their own rebels win them freedom from that more powerful country. They wanted Jesus to side with their hatred of Rome, and maybe even help them enter into armed conflict. Jesus had different ideas about what the Messiah would do. When he reminds them the only leper healed in Elisha’s time was Naaman not one of the Israelite lepers, they tried to stone Jesus. They couldn’t cross that boundary with him.

The story in II Kings is all about crossing boundaries. We see boundaries of class, nationalism, religion, and economics all being ignored or crossed in this healing story. Let’s walk through the text and see how radical it truly was for Jesus’ day, let alone our own.

Naaman was a famous army commander in Aram. Apparently he had what the text calls leprosy. We know they called any skin disorder leprosy, so we can’t tell for sure what he actually had. It must have been small, or hidden, because he was still able to be among people. Those in that day with any skin disorder were separated out and shunned. There was great fear of this disease spreading.

It took great courage for Naaman’s slave girl to approach his wife and suggest that Naaman go to their enemy for healing. In that day being a slave girl was about as low as someone could get in terms of class. She was not only a female, but a young female. She was a slave to boot. As one commentator put it, she was barely more important than a piece of furniture in Naaman’s home. Class and gender boundaries were crossed in this slave girl’s actions.

Incredibly, Naaman listens to her advice. He goes to his king taking a great risk admitting he has what he thinks is leprosy. The king could have banished him to live apart, totally isolated from his community and his position of stature. Instead, the king crosses the boundary of expected medical practices, and decides to help.

Unfortunately, the king of Aram does not listen to the slave girl's advice to send Naaman to Elisha. He sends him to the king of Israel. Kings don't want to deal with lesser people like prophets. He won't cross that boundary. But the king of Aram does seek help from his enemy. That is a huge boundary to cross.

One commentator said this would be like an Afrikaner going to a black doctor in South Africa for medical help, even after apartheid was discontinued. To suggest that one's enemy, and an enemy in a weaker country could help you, does take some humility. Many present day leaders still can't bring themselves to do that.

The King of Israel does not trust Naaman or his king. He suspects a trap. If he fails to heal this man, the king of Aram will have an excuse to attack his country. He will have nothing to do with this request for help.

One scholar says the king of Israel interprets everything from the standpoint of security and stability. He can't see beyond those two realities to help this person in need. If all you care about are security and stability you are probably not going to cross many boundaries.

Elisha steps in to save the day. He invites Naaman to his house. But, Elisha won't go out to greet Naaman. Instead, he sends a messenger to give this powerful army commander his advice about healing. Can you imagine the gall of Elisha? What an insult not to show respect to this great man. And the advice he gives is rather stunning. Basically Elisha tells Naaman to go jump in a river!

Naaman is incensed. He wants Elisha to show him some deference. He wants a dramatic healing service. He says, "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!" Basically Naaman wants a t.v. evangelist and he gets a staid Presbyterian minister instead!

Then another boundary is crossed. Naaman's servants go to him and suggest it couldn't hurt to follow Elisha's advice. That took courage. One did not make suggestions to an angry army commander in those days, especially if you were a servant.

Naaman has the humility to once again cross this class boundary and listen to someone of lower class. He even has to cross the boundary of national pride and wash in the lesser Jordan River instead of those famous rivers of Damascus, the Abana and the Pharpar.

What does all this boundary crossing mean? Healing and wholeness are possibilities when we don't let boundaries or our prejudices limit our options. It takes humility, even great humility and courage to cross some boundaries. Finally, does not this washing in the river remind you of baptism?

Baptism is all about crossing the boundaries of pride and individualism to recognize we need God and each other, the community of faith, if we are going to live lives of wholeness and hope. And when we cross those boundaries, any church worth its salt will encourage us to cross other boundaries, as we journey with Jesus as faithful disciples.

Herb O'Driscoll has his own way of summing up this story. "Personal authority has bowed its head in obedience to a greater and more mysterious authority. Pride has given way to humility. Power has recognized its own vulnerability. A personality that has tended to mistake itself for a god has come into the presence of the reality of God. After all this has occurred, healing has become possible." To which we can all say, "Amen."