

## Unchained Love

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c

Psalm 111

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Luke 17:11-19

What is the mission of the church? According to our catechism, the mission of the church is to restore **ALL** people to unity with God and each other in Christ. Let me say that again: the mission of the church is to restore **ALL** people to unity with God and each other in Christ. -But we live in very divided times and most of our world is far more interested in highlighting the dividing lines between people than healing breaches. -The catechism goes on to ask: How does the church pursue its mission? The church pursues its mission as it prays and worships (good job, you're in church today doing just that), as it proclaims the gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love. Restoring unity in a world bent on division is challenging. The good news is that promoting unity through love is the heart of God and that work is always supported by the Spirit's power.

As we consider how to practically pursue the work of the church in today's environment, we have the tremendous gift of this crazy story from 2 Kings. I am not sure we could ask for a more perfect story to address the moment in which we live. So, this morning, imagine you are back in Sunday School, settle in, and let's have story time.

First... the context of our story. This was a land that was almost always at war, in some ways it has not changed much in that respect. The kingdom of Israel had been divided by civil war and was surrounded by threatening enemies. To the North was Aram, modern day Syria. Aram and Israel had frequent border skirmishes that were slowly weakening Israel and keeping them in fear.

Spiritually at this time, the nation of Israel was wobbly at best. Elisha was the prophetic voice continually calling the people to turn from idolatry back to faithfulness with God. Elisha had also lost favor with the king because of his opposition to the way the dynasty

was using power and wealth to consolidate comfort, leaving the marginalized to suffer hunger and poverty. It is amid this fraught landscape that today's story takes place.

Our human nature wants to begin the story with clear lines that identify who is good and who is bad, so we can root for the proper team. But every character we come across is nuanced, ironic, and unexpected.

The story begins with Naaman, a heathen, Aram's powerful army general, and bloody enemy of Israel. Even so, the text specifically says it was The Lord, the God of Israel, who made Naaman successful... successful against Israel. Naaman was a formidable military force, but he had leprosy.

Presumably, during one of the border skirmishes, Naaman had taken and enslaved one of Israel's citizens, a young, nameless girl. It was this captive slave, separated from her home and people, who alerts the family regarding Elisha, God's prophet who can cure Naaman's leprosy. This young girl, who God did not rescue from her nation's enemy, whose whole life was stolen, whose existence was now consumed with caring for her captor's needs, somehow still believed in God's ability to heal. Not only that, but she was convinced God would be willing to heal Israel's enemy, her captor. Even more startling, is that she wanted Naaman to be healed!

This slave girl's claim found its way to the king of Aram, who valued Naaman so much that he sent a letter to Israel's king. To be clear, the Arameans did not worship Yahweh, and they had no reason to believe the words of an enslaved female child. But they did. When Israel's king received this letter, he panicked, thinking it was a pretext for war. Our text says he tore his clothes, which is a response to grief, fear, and distress. The king of Yahweh's people did not trust Yahweh. Consequently, he did not have the military backing of his own nation's God, and he was terrified. But Naaman, the foreigner, hoped in Yahweh, and humbled himself to seek his enemy's help.

The story then shifts to the prophet Elisha, who hears about Naaman and sends a rebuking message to the King of Israel. Elisha takes matters into his own hands. If Naaman wasn't to experience Yahweh through Israel's king, then God's prophet would act as intermediary. But weirdly, when Naaman and his entourage come to Elisha's house, by the prophet's own request, Elisha failed to show up. Instead, he sent a messenger to tell Naaman to go wash in the grubby Jordan river.

Naaman was so offended by Elisha's complete lack of diplomacy, disenchanted by a seemingly absent deity, and grossed out by Israel's water source, that he left in a rage. If it weren't for his servants, he would never have been healed. But they, a group of nameless, powerless, servants, were bold enough to stand up against the rage of their powerful commander and convince him to act in faith towards a God they did not yet know.

Naaman relents, washing himself, as instructed. He was healed and then humbly returned with his entourage to Elisha where he proclaimed openly his faith in Israel's God.

The story continues after our reading to describe Naaman's complete and singular allegiance to Yahweh back home among his own people.

This story is nuts! Nothing about it happens the way anyone expects. It challenged Israel's nationalism and continues to challenge our own polarization. The heroes in this story are all the wrong people. - Jesus references this story at the beginning of his ministry in Luke chapter four when Jesus scolds his listeners for their lack of faith. He says there were many lepers in Israel during Elisha's time, but the only person **God** healed was a foreign enemy. Our world desperately works towards clear divisions between people. But the God of the Bible consistently works across our dividing lines, using faith through unlikely people to provide unexpected healing and expand God's Kingdom.

The unexpected inclusiveness of God in 2 Kings echoes in today's gospel. Jesus offers healing to a group of lepers and the only one who returns to offer thanks is a foreigner. Humans really like to cast our characters without nuance as either good guys or bad guys,

as either favored by God like us, or enemies. But God reaches across divisions to stretch our understanding of the priorities of Heaven. If God did not privilege the nation of Israel, his own chosen people, there can be nothing about our identity that guarantees our own position on the side of goodness, correct belief, or morality. It is not those whom we separate from that align us with the priorities of God. Rather, it is more likely to be the nameless, powerless, voices of love and faith, reaching across dividing lines, offering hope to our enemies, to whom God responds.

We live in a moment of division so deep it creates gridlock. We can't even talk to each other about the issues closest to our hearts because we're so triggered by differences in ideology. We are so sure that we are right, or they are wrong, that we miss the fact that the Spirit of God is unrestrained by our labels and boundary lines.

Israel's own king was so angry and afraid that he became captive to his own sense of powerlessness. He abdicated the authority God had given Israel to become a blessing to the world because of his disdain for his enemy. All the while God was making a friend of Israel's enemy, blessing and healing the people the king hated and feared.

The church exists to restore unity, but if we're honest, we don't always want unity. We are far more comfortable behind the lines our divisions create. But our divisions won't stop God from moving in unexpected places to transform hearts and expand the kingdom.

When Paul wrote to Timothy, Paul was imprisoned, chained as a criminal. He was not a criminal, but his own government tried to silence the voice of God through him. Rather than feeling angered, afraid, or helpless, Paul responded with faith by saying that while he was chained, The Word of God is **NOT** chained. The Word of God is the voice of God speaking love and unity through us, the church, into the world. That is our mission.

No enemy, no king, and no earthly division is strong enough to hold back God's work of unity through us, if we, like a nameless slave girl will allow ourselves to be moved by love.- It's easy to label enemies, but God's grace empowers us to see beyond our divisions. If we

let it, God's love will work through us and heal the world in unexpected ways.

- May we be a people who trust the love of God so much that we offer it freely, even to our fiercest enemies.