

“In Need of Pardon”
2 Kings 5:1-19; Psalm 30; Galatians 6:1-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20
A Sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes
Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA
July 4, 2010

So . . . it is Independence Day today. If I didn’t have my calendar to remind me it’s the fourth of July, I think I’d know anyway. By the red, white, and blue colors everywhere. By the sound of fireworks – big and small. By all the grills fired up . . . and the patriotic music playing. Like almost every significant and meaningful holiday, Independence Day has a host of semi-related, superficial trappings – as American as apple pie. In the “trappings” category I include the beauty queens of every county and state – resplendent in their crowns and sashes, waving from convertibles – a staple in your holiday parade. I had nearly forgotten about them, until an article in “The Christian Century” (of all things) brought this year’s Miss USA to my attention.

The winner of this year’s pageant, Rima Fakih, is notable for many reasons – among them, the fact that she was born in Lebanon and is the first Arab American to be crowned Miss USA. She is probably also the first Muslim to have won. Rima’s family is Shiite Muslim . . . though she is quick to say they celebrate Christian holidays, too. They have Christian family members . . . also some Jewish cousins! Like so many American young people, Rima is not interested in having religion define her; still, there has been some controversy about her faith. Certain conservative Muslims have said that “to call Rima a Muslim is ‘inaccurate.’” They say one cannot *be* a Muslim woman and wear a bikini in public as Rima did for the pageant.

Why mention this today? It kind of reminds me of Naaman, the Aramean general, and the tension that surfaces between his faith and his office.

You remember the story from Second Kings: Naaman, a mighty warrior, suffered from the skin disease of leprosy. It troubled him enough that he took the advice of a young woman from Israel – a captive serving in his King’s household; he sought help from the Israelite prophet Elisha, as the young woman suggested he do. Naaman also did as Elisha’s messenger instructed him, though he found it humiliating: he went down to the puny, ordinary, inferior *Jordan* River, and washed in its waters. Seven times the general washed. And miracle of miracles: his skin was healed! Naaman was made clean.

Having experienced the power of God in such a physical and intimate way, Naaman is convinced that God is real and should be worshiped. He rushes back to Elisha and states his faith, “There is no God in all the earth except in Israel.” But Naaman doesn’t live in Israel. Already he’s thinking: how can I worship God back home? He asks for some soil – a little holy land to take back with him. Maybe he’s going to scatter it in his fields at home (create a kind of holy zip code) . . . maybe he’s going to sprinkle a bit of dirt in his shoes each morning (to remind himself he is walking on holy ground)¹ . . .

¹ From Tom Are’s paper presented to the 2010 meeting of the Moveable Feast.

. but before Elisha can say anything about the soil, Naaman begins to think about his life in Syria. Walter Brueggemann imagines Naaman

putting on his Syrian uniform and his servants adjusting his many medals of honor . . . Naaman remembers that coming up next month is Veterans Day. He will need to give thanks, on behalf of Syrian veterans, to the gods of Syria. He'll be at the head of the liturgical procession and be seated in the front pew in the temple, adding grandeur to the occasion. The television cameras will be on him. He will be there and the liturgy is not to Yahweh but to Rimmon, the god to whom thanks is given in Damascus for all military favors. [Naaman trusts Elisha enough to be honest.]²

“There is no God but the God of Israel,” he says, “and your servant will no longer offer burnt offerings or sacrifices to any god except the Lord. But may the Lord pardon your servant on one count,” he says. “When my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the Lord pardon your servant on this one count.” Naaman seems embarrassed – stammering and repeating himself. He is anticipating the tension between his faith and his day-to-day life. But the prophet looks him in the eye; he speaks graciously to Naaman, seeming to understand. “Go in peace,” Elisha says. “Go in peace.”

Some purists are sure to view this negatively. Perhaps they think Naaman's compromise reflects a lack of faith or obedience. Perhaps they perceive in him a divided loyalty or lack of clarity about who is Lord. My friend Tom Are – now a pastor in Kansas City – says he strove for purity early in his ministry. For example, he says, he encouraged his church to take the American flag out of their sanctuary; he saw *that* as a tangible expression of their loyalty to Christ and to Christ alone. It was, Tom says, one of the few places he felt pure. Now he thinks he is not so good at purity. While it's true that in this Sanctuary we are Christians first and foremost, we are also Americans, Cameroonians, Indians, Koreans We are called not to rise above the “houses” of our nations, but to find what is holy within them. We must practice our faith as citizens of *someplace* – engaged in the world, not removed from it.

That can be complicated – for all of us. We all go from this place of sanctuary – a place where it's safe to worship and to speak of God and Jesus – into neighborhoods, workplaces, families even, where that becomes more difficult. It can be awkward to practice the Christian faith in public places, because we are rubbing shoulders with Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, agnostics, atheists . . . and people's expectations are different. We don't want to offend. We aren't comfortable revealing the intimate experiences of our lives. Sometimes we think we don't understand our faith sufficiently to speak of it well. And of course, the language of faith does not translate directly to the language of business or politics. Bringing our faith into contact with the other aspects of our lives can get us into some ambiguous, even compromising situations.

² Walter Brueggemann, *Testimony to Otherwise* (2001) 51.

But *failing* to bring our faith into contact with our life can be problematic, too. . . . As we talked about this, my friend Tom told me what John Danforth, Episcopal priest and three-term senator of Missouri, once said at Tom's church. Danforth shared about a time he had gone to worship on Ash Wednesday. He went to a noontime service, which meant that afterwards, he would go back to work. I don't know if this was the senate or his law office. Either place would be filled with folks who were Christians themselves, some of whom would have gone to Ash Wednesday services, too. But Danforth said that as soon as he got into his car, he took his handkerchief and cleaned his forehead, so that no one would know he'd been to worship. He said he was embarrassed to show the world he'd been to church. But once he'd removed the signs of his faith, he was *more* troubled. He'd had a chance to take some holy dirt with him – a chance to bring his faith into closer contact with his life – and he hadn't taken that chance.³

All of this got me to thinking about the movement of our worship every Sunday – how we *gather* before the Lord, *listen* for God's word to us, *respond* in prayer and song, affirmation and offering, *then ask to be sent* out into the world with a greater sense of God's purpose for us, and the determination to do God's will. Our Prayer of Great Thanksgiving – the prayer around communion – has the same kind of movement. We pray in thanks for all God has done, in praise for Christ's life among us, and in petition that the Holy Spirit will come and *send us out* to be Christ's body in the world. The point is: what we do here is not meant to stay here. We are meant to take what we have learned and heard and experienced out into the world . . . to live our faith in the situations of real, everyday life. *Can we be Christian and do what we do?* To ask that question, exploring the places where our faith and work rub against each other is part of our responsibility as people of faith. But to exercise that responsibility can be hard to do; we feel the tension.

How comforting it is – and how fitting – that each service closes with a benediction. “Peace be with you,” we say to each other, as Elisha said it to Naaman. “Go in peace.” Sometimes, I think, we say it with a sigh, like, “*Good luck with that peace,*” you know? It is mostly an imperfect peace we find in life, as our obedience is imperfect and our faith is imperfect. In the world we know – where God's kingdom has not fully come, and God's will is not everywhere done – you and I face so many situations that are not pure or clear or uncomplicated; God's perfect peace can seem out of reach.

But then, to sigh as we pass the peace may be a good thing to do. Like Naaman's stammered apology, maybe, it can show we get it. It can show we understand that *faith matters* and must be worked out in the contexts of our lives, complex though those contexts may be. It can put us on the lookout for a greater peace, a more faithful path, and truer ways to follow God whose power is for our healing, as it was for Naaman's healing.

³ Tom says Danforth told this story at Village Presbyterian Church. He was talking about his book in which this story can be found. John Danforth, *Faith and Politics* (2006) 56.

As my friend Tom says, peace does not just come to us; it is always something into which we must go. “Peace will be best known as we learn to trust that in this world in which we’ve been placed and where God has chosen to dwell, each day is lived in the shadow of the house of Rimmon [– in the presence of others powers and competing loyalties and responsibilities.] But grace has placed soil from God’s kingdom into our shoes. That may be enough to help us go in peace. That, and the *grace* we hear when we ask, *may the Lord pardon your servant on one count.*”⁴

⁴ Tom’s paper.