

Trusting Without Reservation

Wayne Waibel – 07/03/2022

Every now and then you get a conglomeration of passages in the lectionary that scream a specific message. The way it comes together this week is one of those instances. Unlike the usual flow from Old Testament to Psalms through the Epistle to the Gospel, this week's arrangement is full of alternative lessons as well.

With so many competing angles of attack, landing on something concrete was very illusive. I don't know whether the inspiration that comes part and parcel with the Holy Bible seems to be getting clearer, or the world is so much more self-absorbed – allowing for the voice of Scripture to resonate above the din.

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One of the hard lessons Naaman gets to learn is that his station in life has nothing to do with his salvation. His story in today's Old Testament lesson stops before his conversion as that is a whole other story – so we only get to see his reluctance to follow Elisha's prescribed cure due to his arrogance and subsequent anger. Had he not listened to his nameless servants, or the slave girl from Israel – his fate would have been much different.

So many complexities are exposed in this story. The slave girl's general observation that a prophet existed in Israel that could cure his affliction of leprosy. The king of Israel assuming that the letter from Naaman's commander was a pretense designed to invoke his anger and provoke him to war! Then there's Naaman's taking umbrage to the fact that Elisha didn't visit him personally, but sent a messenger with instructions for his cure. And finally Naaman taking the advice of his lowly servant and following Elisha's prescription for healing after all.

God's providence is complex and rarely matches our assumptions. That point comes slamming home whenever I find myself behind a driver that clearly has no business being on the road. There are any number of explanations for why they're driving like they are, but the bottom line is I can have no way of knowing what that reason is. So I must relax and press on – allowing them plenty of room to maneuver.

Paul's letter to the Galatians illuminates the point that the Law of Moses has been superseded by the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The life of Christ does not dismiss the law – it fulfills the law.

These tiny little rules were in essence designed to protect the children of Israel from themselves until the coming of the Messiah. With that coming, came a new covenant, and a new reality. The kingdom of God is at hand, and comes near.

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We run into this dilemma all the time – not fully understanding the circumstances, and rendering judgment without being fully informed. Salvation is by faith not works, but actions are not inconsequential.

Take for example our leadership at the highest levels. Every move they make is calculated to produce votes. The idea of servitude is so far removed from the lexicon of public service that to even speak of it is viewed as weakness.

And yet – we continue to vote for a candidate almost exclusively based on either image or personal bias. The whole electoral process is so flawed that there is very little faith in the outcome anymore.

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When Jesus sent out the seventy with their directive of complete reliance on God alone for their sustenance, he was giving them a wondrous gift. The gift of understanding what you can do without.

This story, along with Naaman’s makes clear that material disadvantages are not spiritual disadvantages. For the Disciples of Christ it is the lesson that the message, not the messenger, is the focus of our existence.

And for Naaman – he was the surprise recipient of wholeness despite his own reluctance and arrogance. It’s interesting to note that his cleansing came about solely as a result of the pleading from his lowly, marginalized servants.

Naaman and even the Apostle Paul for that matter along with our current heads of state prove that the grace of God is extended to those who do nothing to qualify for salvation. The jury is still out for the current crop of world leaders, but there is some evidence to suggest that a few of them are somewhat enlightened.

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The thing about hard lessons is they are generally the most valuable, and ironically – the hardness in them is our own resistance to the lesson being conveyed. Just as Naaman’s ego nearly cost him his eventual healing, our stubbornness often gets in the way of our learning process.

It would be nice to have the good sense to recognize things for what they are, but we don’t always – so we flounder and stumble and look like an idiot when all we’re really trying to do is not look like an idiot.

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The point Paul was trying to make with the Galatians was a very simple truth. In Christ, believers become keepers of their brothers and sisters. It's a direct counterpoint to the lesson of Cain and Able. Radical for certain, but a concept whose time, by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, has come.

There is much to reexamine as a result of Christ's redemptive mission. While some things hold fast and true, other old ways – need to fall away. And these were tough calls in the first century. While there was the oppressive nature of Imperial Rome – there was also the unbending doctrine espoused by the ruling elders in the Jewish community. In the midst of this very messy dynamic - were the Messiah and His disciples.

Their efforts to save mankind from itself brought many hard truths and radical views. All of which were predicated on the living God whose desire to sanctify the world to Himself was paramount. Even to a world that had yet to embrace the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And that is why and how God is responsible for the growth in our communities.

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The nice thing about a life of service is that it is its own reward. Folks that embark on that kind of mission really don't need the accolades and recognition that most of us do in order to keep at it. It is enough to believe that you've made a difference in somebody's life.

It feels much like the servant girl felt when she set Naaman on the road to healing by telling his wife about Elisha. Or how Paul felt in returning the Galatians to a focus on helping one another as opposed to dwelling on the old laws as sacrosanct. Or the seventy disciples on their return realizing that the joy in service holds riches beyond the world's ability to recompense.

Additionally they received an alternative focus, "Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven."

Holding power over the demons of the world is here and now. Being heaven bound is there and then. And as a people we tend to favor immediate gratification. It seems that all of that which matters really comes later.

We wander and we wonder. We understand that it's not a sprint, it's a marathon. We also get that we store up for ourselves treasures that are in heaven where neither moth nor rust consume, because where our treasure is, there will our heart be also. The part that we get stuck on time and again is faith.

We work our faith, and we nurture our faith, and it takes a toll. But we realize that nothing of import necessarily comes easy. Probably the most difficult aspect to faith, which is why it takes so long for it to rest solidly in our hearts, is the realization that faith is not believing without proof - faith is trusting without reservation. Amen.