

**LOYALTIES: 2 Kings 5 Luke 10:1-20 July 3, 2022**  
**New Store/Maysville Presbyterian Churches**

Take a moment and think back to our Old Testament passage. Here are some colorful characters: Naaman, the powerful man of war; a servant girl (read: slave), the powerless child; the unnamed wife and king, influential persons to the mighty Naaman; another unnamed king of Israel, impotent when faced with the request for a cure; and Elisha, a powerful prophet, and his servant, Gehazi, whose loyalty falters. What a contrasting cast of characters! In some ways, one can see the complex interplay of human relationships, expectations about behavior, power, and identity, all at work here. There is a lot going on in this story about outsiders and insiders, about who has real power and authority, about where true loyalty lies and about how we are or are not open to God at work through others and also in us.

It would be so easy for us to look at this story and talk about how humiliated Naaman had to become before God cured him. That would play well with folks who see God as this vengeful, judging, punishing God who always is looking for ways to show off His power. It's a bit harder to see how Naaman came to accept that all of his human respect, knowledge, and authority had to be put aside in order to be cured of his debilitating skin disease.

It's hard to be open to hearing God; in recognizing God at work; even when we hear or see it happening, then to get on board with it. Sometimes we

want to take the easy way — to copy what everyone else is doing. How often have I sat in meetings where the discussion on policy or procedure is centered on finding out what the church down the street, or across the presbytery, or on the other side of the country is doing.

That sometimes can be helpful; but, what are we doing here? What are we been doing that works in our context, with our resources of people and place, of time, talent, and treasure?

While our text doesn't say, one could surmise that whatever skin disease

While our text doesn't say, one could surmise that whatever skin disease Naaman had, the physicians and priests in Damascus couldn't bring about a cure. Our story moves us from stating the presenting problem — Naaman's leprosy — through a probable cure through the prophet in Israel, to a declaration and counter-demonstration of loyalty. As I said, it's hard to hear the answers to our problems from unlikely sources.

The Israelite slave girl tells her mistress, Naaman's wife, that Naaman's cure could be found in the conquered land. Clearly, there's irony at play: "unofficial" sources lead to salvation; as opposed to any official process or procedure. We saw this in the events of a decade ago — in the Middle East: the so-called "Arab Spring," where official press releases denied what was happenings in the squares and streets. But, through Twitter and cell phones, Skype and the internet, the world learned of government crackdowns, beatings, and shootings. And, we learned of similar happenings in Hong Kong, and other places of unrest, like in the Ukraine now.

The tendency or temptation for people who have "made it" (or are rapidly

on the way to "making it") is to ignore any knowledge that doesn't come through officially approved channels of those in power. Academics can be guilty of this, so can pastors, lawyers, politicians, even parents. It's easy to limit to whom we look for the truth — be it media sources, special interest groups, administrators in our schools, civil government, even our denominations. This is not to say, "Become a cynic!" Rather, "Become open and discerning about listening for God." And, that's not so easy.

Yet, neither is it impossible. The king of Israel might have thought so when he got the letter from his counterpart in Damascus. Background context carries the understanding that social convention precludes people addressing people of vastly different ranks directly. The slave girl speaks to her mistress, Naaman's wife; the wife speaks to Naaman; Naaman speaks to his king; the king of Aram speaks to the king of Israel; that king speaks to the prophet; the prophet speaks to his servant; and both the prophet's servant and his servants speak to Naaman. The way of the world is observed.

And so, the king of Israel receives the letter from his counterpart who is

also his overlord and his enemy. How hard is it to receive the offer of an olive branch from an enemy? It would be easy to reject it out of hand. It'd be understandable to take it cautiously. But, it would be hard to accept it sincerely, and be open to seeing a positive outcome of the request. The king of Israel shows how easy it is to close off possibilities. He initially thinks that the king of Aram has asked of him to personally cure Naaman.

How often do we fall into that trap? Only Sally can bake the bread for

dinner. Only John can fix the boiler. Only Sam and Gina can prepare communion. Only Alice can sing solos. And, we don't just turn to specific individuals to get things done, we come to believe it's easier if we do the things our selves. It's too hard to ask someone to help find rides for Amanda who needs to go to the doctor's office. It's easier to excuse asking for help or sharing the work by claiming it's a bother to anyone we might ask. What is it about human living that makes us often try to constrict our interpretative possibilities so that life works against us?

The king of Israel tears his clothes and cries his woes, and Elisha seeks him out. In another bit of irony, the prophet knows more about what's going on in the kingdom than does the king. It's easy for us to see how foolish the king looks. We can imagine how unsure he might be when receiving Elisha's letter telling the king to send Naaman to the prophet. Harder for us and for him is to know the outcome. Like kings, we want to be in control of all things around us. We Presbyterians joke about the two watchwords used in attempt to describe all that we do: "decently and in order." Yet, as easy as it is to say those words, it's hard to enact them. — specifically, the "decent" part... And, in my opinion, both are sometimes detrimental when enforced too rigorously. Being flexible, yet effective, isn't easy, but the opposite can result in disaster.

So, if you're like me, you're warming up to Naaman, the mighty man of war who has gone on a journey to find a cure and now arrives at the house of Elisha. One would now expect Elisha to come out, raise his hands and pray to God, then touch the leprous man, effecting the healing. That's clearly what Naaman thought. Instead he is given instructions by Elisha's servant,

Gehazi, to go wash seven times in the Jordan. After all this hoop-la, after traveling from Damascus to the court of Israel, then to the house of the renowned prophet, instructions are given by a servant!!

On the surface, this is where it's hard to hear God at work. We so much want to have the smoke and fireworks. But, rarely is God flashy. Sure, there are accounts when God does the spectacular: Creation, the Flood, the Exodus, Moses' and Elijah's encounters with God on the mountaintop, even the miracles done through prophets like Elijah and Elisha. And, there's a couple of other big ones, like that involving Mary, the mother of Jesus and God's incarnation accompanied by a host of angels, as well as the work of the disciples sent out by Jesus. But, by and large, God works on the QT.

Which makes placing our loyalty a hard thing to do. We like the flashy — fireworks, pomp and circumstance — the loud, the brash, the brazen, all the glitz and glitter. There seems to be something in us that is drawn toward all that, and makes us willing to place all our trust and hope in those events and people. Yet, to quote Shakespeare, — *all that glitters is not gold*; meaning that we need to beware of the fancy, the razzle-dazzle by politicians, preachers, entertainers, and others who seek to impress us with what often turns out to be nothing more than smoke and mirrors.

Naaman asks for forgiveness from the Lord via Elisha when he is required to accompany his king into his master's places of worship. The general has come to fully believe in and wishes not to offend the God of Israel. He knows that his loyalty to his king will, at times, come into conflict with his new-

found loyalty to God. And so, he seeks to balance the two, placing his loyalty to God first by asking for loads of Israeli dirt so he can worship God and telling Elisha that he will not sacrifice to any other god but the God of Israel, and then to his king as he follows him to his places of worship. Two loyalties that Naaman acknowledges will be at times in conflict.

Are we willing and able to live with a similar tension? Jesus once told his disciples and his critics that we are to render to God what is God's and render to Caesar what is his. Can we learn from Naaman (and, conversely,

tender to Caesar what is his. Can we learn from Naaman (and, conversely, by Gehazi) how to rightly honor God and country this holiday that celebrates our independence from tyranny?

**Let us pray:** Mighty and merciful God, You show us how You work — not necessarily with thunder and lightning, with flash and dazzle, but in quiet ways, in ways that make us strain to listen and learn. Open our ears, our hearts, our minds to discern what You call us to do, whom You call us to be. Let us be led, as was Naaman, to listen and not be closed, to seek until all is found, and then rejoice and honor You with renewed commitment to live in Your kingdom first, to be Your servants always in Jesus' name, to share Your love, grace, mercy, and hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.