

God Beyond Borders

2 Kings 5:1-14 (15-19a)

Farmville Baptist Church

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Is there a part of the Bible you like best? For many, they are most drawn to the stories of Jesus: uplifting accounts of God taking on flesh and blood and caring for hurt human beings. Others are drawn to the parables: short, pithy tales with a strong moral lesson. Some people like clear-cut commands to follow, like the rules of the Torah, others appreciate the folksy wisdom of Proverbs, and still others like the beauty and poetry of the psalms. A few folks are even wired to enjoy the imaginative ponderings of John's Revelation and the book of Daniel, with images of mythical beasts and promises of reward for those who remain faithful.

Growing up, none of those were my favorite parts of the Bible, though I've always had a deep love of the story of Jesus and a bit of appreciation for the apocalyptic accounts of the future. But when I read my Bible for fun, without any Sunday school lesson guiding my reading or preacher inviting me to turn to such-and-such a text in worship, I turned most often to the historical books of the Old Testament. I loved the stories of the great kings and mighty warriors, the stalwart prophets and the intrigues of the court. Joshua and Jericho, David and Goliath, Elijah and Ahab – these were the stories that captured my interest. They were stories of heroes and villains and adventure, yes, but they were also stories of people, fallible people who struggled to figure out what God wanted for them, their community and their world. They were real people – people I could identify

with and stories that were part of a bigger Story – and I loved reading about them. And right there in the mix was the story of Naaman.

Right off the bat, Naaman is not someone we should like. Israel, after all, are the “good guys” in the story of the Bible, or at least “God’s guys.” They are the ones we are supposed to cheer for; even though they don’t always get it right, even though they have bad kings and bad priests and bad people in charge from time to time, they’re better than those horrible heathens out there, right? We root for them. But Naaman isn’t an Israelite. He isn’t a Jew. No, we’re told, Naaman is from Aram.

Aram was the ancient biblical word for the nation of Syria – and in almost 3000 years, not much has changed. Israel and Syria are generally hostile to each other now, and

they were hostile to each other then. In fact, Syria, or Aram as it was known in the time of the kings, was one of Israel's primary enemies, and an enemy to many neighbors. Even though at the time of this story they seemed to be between wars, Israel and Aram were at each other's throats constantly. And Naaman is from Aram.

Not only was he from Aram, the Scriptures tell us that he was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was the general-in-chief! He was chair of the joint chiefs of staff! If Israel had had a top enemies list posted in town squares, Naaman's picture would have been on it. He had ascended to the top of the military hierarchy, and in that era you didn't do that by working behind desks for your whole career. You had proven yourself in combat, raided your enemies and commanded on the field of battle. Naaman had Israelite

blood on his hands by the time we meet him...probably a lot of it.

All of that combat experience, all of those successful military campaigns and raids had brought Naaman almost everything he could hope for. He was, we are told, an *ish gadol* – a great man. He commanded the legions of the king. He advised his ruler on major military matters, and probably was a counselor for domestic matters as well. He had influence to burn. Naaman also had wealth: slaves and servants and silver and gold. He had fame and fortune, power and prestige. But there was one thing that made his life difficult: he had leprosy.

In today's world, leprosy mainly refers to something called Hansen's disease, a skin condition caused by bacteria that deaden pain and damage nerve endings. The ancient

understanding of leprosy, however, was much more widespread, including such conditions as psoriasis, eczema, and fungal infections. Some were serious, others weren't, some contagious, others not. Yet none were understood, at least not in the way we understand such conditions today, and thus all were feared. The diseases captured by the catch-all term "leprosy" in the Bible were socially alienating and physically and emotionally damaging. For an *ish gadol*, a great man, to have leprosy was unheard-of...but Naaman, the *ish gadol*, the commander of the armies, the king's right-hand man, had leprosy, and for all his insider status, that made him an outcast, an outsider.

I'm sure that, at the time, there weren't too many Israelites who felt much sympathy for Naaman. After all, he had won great renown, power and privilege, by leading the

Syrian armies against Israel, among others. Leprosy might have seemed his just desserts to those who felt he was their bitter enemy. Yet one Israelite had compassion on Naaman – perhaps the most surprising Israelite imaginable. His slave girl, a young woman captured in a military skirmish and put to work in the house of Naaman, suggested that he go to Israel and see the prophet of God. Why? So “he would cure him of his leprosy.”¹ Strangely enough, “breaking out of the silence of slavery, it is her speaking that begins Naaman’s healing....She is the initiator of hope.”² Her information sparks hope in the hearts of Naaman and his wife, and ultimately his king, and with a royal blessing and a small fortune in hand, Naaman crosses the border into Israel in search of a cure.

¹ 2 Ki. 5:3

² Samuel Giere, Working Preacher commentary, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=627

“This delightfully pesky story...is a story of border-crossings,” Professor Samuel Giere tells us, “whereby the Lord works in mysterious ways.”³ There is the obvious crossing of the physical border between Israel and Aram, or Syria, two geopolitical entities who are in the midst of a decades-long cold war as this tale is spun, and it is this border-crossing that most worries the king of Israel. “Why does this fellow [the king of Aram] send me someone to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!”⁴ He thinks the king of Aram is trying to pick a fight! I imagine the king was trying to figure out how to get rid of Naaman without sparking a flat-out war – and he may even have been trying to figure out how to cripple Syria in the process.

³ Giere

⁴ 2 Ki. 5:7

Then the prophet of God speaks. Elisha gets word to the king: “Send Naaman to me.” And with that appeal, other borders are crossed. Naaman arrives at Elisha’s house and is treated, not like the *ish gadol* that he is used to being, but as the supplicant seeking help that he really is. The great and mighty are brought down to the same level as everyone else. Then, when he is told of the divinely-ordained cure, Naaman rebels, not because it is hard, but because it is too easy. He can’t possibly be cured by a sevenfold dip in the muddy waters of the Jordan! Yet at the insistence of his servants to at least try this admittedly easy and harmless task, Naaman steps into the river...and he is healed.

Here, we find that another border is crossed. In that time and place, the gods were believed to be concerned only with their own lands and attentive only to the needs of their

own people. Rimmon, the god of Aram, was who Naaman had worshipped in Damascus, because Naaman was from Aram and served the king of Aram. Rimmon is who he prayed to before he went into battle asking for victory, and Rimmon is who he sang praise to when he returned home in glory. Yet now Naaman's eyes are opened as his skin is healed: there is a god more powerful than the god of Aram, indeed a god more powerful than any other. It is the God of Israel, and it is his praises that Naaman now sings. "In his healing, Naaman has been met and healed by the Lord in a way that leads to knowing,"⁵ and in that knowing he crosses a border: he understands that the true God is no longer for one group of people in one place, but is for everyone who will call on him. Naaman returns to the prophet Elisha, ecstatic

⁵ Giere

and singing God's praises. He offers gifts that are refused, picks up some souvenir dirt to take home as a tangible reminder of God's presence, and starts to head out.

But then he turns back. "Elisha," he says, "you know that I am fully committed to God now...but I'm still the general of Aram. I still have public duties to perform, like supporting my king and singing patriotic songs of my land. For us, that means singing songs to Rimmon. Is that okay with you?" And Elisha surprisingly says, "Go in peace." "In the face of a pressing dilemma, the prophet does not forbid and perhaps blesses Naaman in his position as commander of the army of the king of Aram with all that this entails."⁶

Naaman returns to Damascus and his king. He goes into the temple of Rimmon to offer incense in a display of patriotic

⁶ Giere

loyalty. He raises the sword in service to a pagan king. He even, presumably, returns at the head of the armies of Aram when war breaks out between Israel and Aram again a couple of chapters later, a war which sees the capital of Israel, Samaria, put under siege and thousands suffer from famine. Somehow, God even cares for such a man like that and sets him free from his physical torment of leprosy.

Now, of all the borders that are crossed in this story, I'll be honest: this is the one I have the hardest time with. I can understand a God who says its okay to cross a national border in search of relief from pain or threat or disease or violence. I can go along with a God who says that the borders between the high and mighty and the low and humble are artificial and deserve to be ignored. I can get behind a God who says that his love and his blessings are for

everyone, no matter where they come from or what language they speak or how they previously saw the world before they experienced God's love. But a God who blesses a man who is actively opposing my people, my worldview, my way of life – and even says that its okay for him to continue to do so – I'm not so okay with that. I'd imagine most of us aren't.

This is a difficult story for us to hear, especially right now. Tensions around borders are particularly high in our country, dividing us from our neighbors and friends and family and fellow Americans. There are all sorts of boundaries that we are drawing up between ourselves in our society, not to mention boundaries between our society and the wide world around us. We passionately debate and argue what course we should take, what leaders we should support, what path is most righteous. We raise the walls of our minds

and bar the gates of our hearts and associate only with those who are like us – and eventually we can grow to believe that no one who is different than us can possibly be okay. No one who believes differently than we do about what is right and what is wrong or who votes for a different party than we do can possibly be worthy of a hearing, much less of God’s blessing. No one who speaks a different language, or comes from a different country, or worships in a different manner can possibly be someone to whom we should extend compassion. No one who reacts to a changing world with concern and fear can possibly be worth listening to and empathizing with. And no one who scares us – legitimately or not – can possibly be someone we should give the benefit of the doubt or even help.

In the midst of all of that, we hear this story...and to be honest, it probably unsettles us. Why? Because the God we find in this story “disrespects the boundaries that we humans erect.” Those border lines on maps? They don’t affect how God feels about those people caught on either side or the compassion he wants to show. Those fault lines in our communities that divide us from one another? They don’t affect how God cares for us on one side, on the other, or caught in the middle. Those fractures in our families and in our friendship circles that keep us from trusting one another? They don’t affect how God wants us to behave as his people – a people called to transcend boundaries and borders, to come together around our common love in Christ, and to put that love into action in our broken, divided world.

The truth is, joining God beyond the borders of our world is a scary thing to do. It was for Elisha – his king could have said he was giving aid and comfort to the enemy! And it was for Jesus; when Jesus brought this story up in his hometown of Nazareth, the people who had seen him grow up grew so angry they tried to throw him over a cliff.⁷ Why would it be any less scary for us? Our world is defined by borders and boundaries: who's in and who's out, who's blessed and who's cursed, who's safe and who's dangerous, who's worthy and who's not, who's us and who's them.

But those aren't the definitions of God's kingdom.

Those aren't the ways of God's love.

We are called to join God beyond borders, driven not by nationalism or party or family loyalty or ideological purity,

⁷ Luke 4:27

but by the compassion and grace and mercy and love of Jesus Christ. That's the only boundary that God uses in our world – and it's a boundary that includes everyone.