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SCRIPTURE READING

2 Kings 5:1-14

Galatians 6:1-16

Luke 10:1-10

Are we getting the message?

It is appropriate that these scriptures fall in the middle of the Pentecost season, the season emphasizing the growth of the church. We have talked about growth before it is not a new subject and yet it is one we wrestle with time and time again. And yet ever so often when I'm not focused on just numbers and I'm focused on the important kinds of growth I hear the deep message of the gospel again.

Love, hospitality, justice, restoration, and healing are the foundations of our faith. God's saving grace is not about how many we have in the pews - it is about "loving our neighbour" and sharing the good news of that love through God's loving spirit. I truly believe when we are about the good news we as individuals and community will grow in every way.

The central message this week is simple but significant. God's commitment to justice, restoration and healing is proclaimed constantly. And yet the way God's saving work comes into being is often through small, ordinary people and actions.

Let's look back to the story of Naaman. This story is characterized by irony. The people who should be in the know, like the king of Israel, appear clueless, while the marginalized, such as the Israelite servant girl, perceive accurately what God is doing. Naaman almost misses his opportunity for healing because it does not come with the kind of fanfare he is used to. He complains because Elisha doesn't come to him directly, instead he speaks to him through a servant. And the servant directs him to simply wash in an ordinary river in Israel. Naaman's struggles to accept the prophets directions, and his healing does not occur until he changes his attitude and embraces the ordinary people and places God has directed him to.

How often are we like Naaman? How often do we allow our pride and arrogance to get in the way of healing in our lives. How often do we ignore the healing The Holy is offering us just because it's not coming with the fanfare we prefer?

Scriptures reminds us again and again that the wholeness God offers is not the same as the wholeness the world offers because it comes at us in the most unexpected ways, times and places.

Our pride, wealth and power will not bring us a cure - it will not bring us more love - it will not make us better people. God consistently works will all people and creation no matter their status.

Both Naaman's pride and our pride are challenged in this story of God's complex love, healing and purpose. "Naaman states preconceptions about the way his healing should take place. He expects at least a little special attention from the prophet... We *too* might expect God somehow to punish Naaman for his pride, at least by withholding healing, but, ironically, God heals Naaman, who is Syrian and not Israelite and who is skeptical of Elisha's God. The irony of Naaman's healing offers the opportunity for careful thought about the ways we understand God's involvement in our lives and the lives of those around us."¹ We are challenged to notice a God who accepts beyond compare.

With that challenge fortunately, How then we shall live as people of faith is laid out in Galatians as the author speaks about the work of following Christ in the every day terms of our relationships with one another as we care for one another, support one another, share one another's burdens and do good for all.

One author wrote "Too often, it seems, interpersonal dynamics in the church simply mirror those of the world. There is no shortage of finger-pointing for whatever is perceived to be wrong, and no shortage of judgment for those perceived to have messed up. Too often those experiencing crisis in their lives avoid the church for fear of judgment or being smothered by condescending care-givers. The person or family in crisis grows more isolated, and the community of faith is not the place of healing and restoration it is intended to be.

In stark contrast is Paul's understanding of the responsibility we bear for one another. This responsibility extends to restoring one who has transgressed, but doing so in a spirit of gentleness, without judgment, without an air of condescension. It means "bearing one another's burdens," recognizing our own vulnerability and sharing in the guilt and pain of the transgression as well as the responsibility for healing and restoration.

Bearing one another's burdens in this way is a tall order, a fine line to walk. The temptations of excessive meddling, self-deception, and judging the neighbor are ever present. Yet we are called to be an alternative community of God's grace, mercy, healing, and restoration in an unforgiving world. This is possible only by the power of the Spirit, only by God remaking us a new creation in Christ."

The authentic Christian life humbly devotes itself to the benefit of others, sharing and receiving whatever is helpful. The true gospel produces a church in which unity exists with remarkable diversity...Paul's message teaches that the gospel will produce congregations in which unity exists with amazing diversity. I think that then begs us to pause and ask Are we willing to be truly diverse? Welcoming of all? Bearing burdens of one another?

There are ways in which this community does that so well. Last Wednesday was such a beautiful expression of this communities love. My heart was warmed as I came on Tuesday night to see a

¹ Haywood Barringer Spangler "Feasting on the word"

choir loft overflowing with folks who wanted to sing to remember Don and support Retta and the family. I know that when I let people know we were going to do a barbecue people questioned what I was thinking. I know it meant more work for some. And yet you did it (with only a few complaints). I know that Retta felt love like she dared not to imagine. I pray that perhaps some of her burden was lightened even if for a moment as we offered to bear it with her. That my friends is community living the good news for one another is the face of deep grief.

John van de Laar reminds us that “It is often tempting as we seek to share Christ’s message in the Church and into our communities to think about making big changes and attempting big, attention grabbing projects. However, our impact is often less about how we structure our services or what kind of music we use or how “prominent” we are in our community. Often it is in the quiet work of nurturing care and service within our community, and in doing the slow, transformative work of growing into caring, serving Christ-followers in our homes, workplaces and sports clubs that ultimately determines how effective our ministry is. When, instead of pointing fingers at “the world” we are willing to accept its “hospitality” speaking blessing, and offering grace and mercy and justice in every situation and with every person, then people begin coming to us to learn more about our faith and the One we follow. But, if we fail to do this, then no amount of words or programs will be enough to compensate for our lack of grace and goodness.”²

van de Laar goes on to say “It is important that the work of celebrities and high profile leaders in the struggle for justice is recognized and celebrated, but justice is really achieved not by these few. If we are to reverse the impact of climate change, it will take small but significant shifts in the habits of many ordinary people. If our world is to become more peaceful, it will mean ordinary people must learn to understand and respect one another, recognizing our common humanity. If wealth is to be equitably distributed, it will mean changing the values by which ordinary individuals live from consumerism to simplicity and from accumulating to giving. If these shifts were just taken seriously by Christ-followers alone, the impact would be nothing short of miraculous. As Christians around the world join together in peace-making, hospitality, taking responsibility for the change we can bring and doing small acts of goodness, the Gospel message would be preached clearly and powerfully, with very few words necessary.”

That is the message Jesus gives in the Gospel. Go out and spread the good news. While you share the good news be hospitable and accept hospitality along the way from all who offer it, even the ordinary. Jesus’ message is one that is to transform our lives while it empowers us to

² John van de Laar, Sacredise Proper 9C

share shalom with all the world. Francis of Assisi said “Preach the gospel at all times and when necessary use words.”

Jesus doesn't believe in scarcity like we do. He knows that people are hungry for more depth, more joy, more compassion, more shalom. The harvest is ready he says all we have to do is gather people in who are hungry and thirsty for more. We don't produce the hunger it's already there. Our commission is to gather others into God. We are to bless, and be blessed, be hospitable and allow others to offer us hospitality.

Although it seems almost a bit of a side track I agree with the commentators that I read who said we cannot miss the role of hospitality in this gospel. Hospitality is about accepting not just giving. The hospitality of the seventy is shown in their mission of peace, in which they are to be inclusive, getting rid of self-centeredness, and personal gain. Their single purpose is to prepare others to encounter Jesus. This is done peacefully, through grateful presence and conversation. By allowing others to serve and receive them.

Because most of us are more accustomed to giving aid than receiving it, it is easy to miss the vulnerability and dependence Jesus commands of his disciples.

In a racial justice workshop I did last week the conversation came up around why we think we need to help others of different races or socioeconomic status or whatever the difference may be. When will we learn to let go of our pride, and presumed status we will be able to be with one another and accept the gifts and flaws we all have. When we acknowledge that God is a God of all not just our God to share only then will we offer true hospitality. Only then will we get that sharing the good news is sharing peace, love, justice, compassion for all - not just for those who deserve it. Our commission is to live out the kingdom of God not just in this place but in all the world so that no matter who you are or where you come from you are welcomed, healed and loved. Blessed to be a blessing to all the world. May we so live.