

“Following Instructions”
St. Paul’s UCC Church
July 3, 2022

Friends in Christ....

We are now Ordinary Time in the church calendar. This will last until Christ the King Sunday in November. It gives us an opportunity to hear some of the many stories that we find in the Bible. Most of the Gospel readings are from Luke as is today's. The Old Testament lesson is from 2 Kings and is a part of the story of Naaman, which is one of my favorites.

From Luke, we hear Jesus sending out disciples on a test run for evangelism, to announce that the kingdom of God is at hand. The number sent out is listed in some bibles as 70 and other bibles as 72. The Common English Bible (the CEB that I use) has the number at 72. The comment is that there is about an equal number of each in the ancient manuscripts, and that the number somehow relates to the number of known countries at that time. Jesus gives the disciples very strict guidelines to perform their ministry and relying on the Mid East tradition of hospitality. From Luke 10:1-11, 16-20 (CEB)

Seventy-Two Sent Out

10 After these things, the Lord commissioned seventy-two others and sent them on ahead in pairs to every city and place he was about to go. ²He said to them, “The harvest is bigger than you can imagine, but there are few workers. Therefore, plead with the Lord of the harvest to send out workers for his harvest. ³Go! Be warned, though, that I am sending you out as lambs among wolves. ⁴Carry no wallet, no bag, and no sandals. Do not even greet anyone along the way. ⁵Whenever you enter a house, first say, ‘May peace be on this house.’ ⁶If anyone there shares God’s peace, then your peace will rest on that person. If not, your blessing will return to you. ⁷Remain in this house, eating and drinking whatever they set before you, for workers deserve their pay. Do not move from house to house. ⁸Whenever you enter a city and its people welcome you, eat what they set before you. ⁹Heal the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘God’s kingdom has come upon you.’ ¹⁰Whenever you enter a city and the people do not welcome you, go out into the streets and say, ¹¹ ‘As a complaint against you, we brush off the dust of your city that has collected on our feet. But know this: God’s kingdom has come to you.’

¹⁶Whoever listens to you listens to me. Whoever rejects you rejects me. Whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.”

The Seventy-Two Return

¹⁷The seventy-two returned joyously, saying, “Lord, even the demons submit themselves to us in your name.”

¹⁸Jesus replied, “I saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning. ¹⁹Look, I have given you authority to crush snakes and scorpions underfoot. I have given you authority over all the power of the enemy. Nothing will harm you. ²⁰Nevertheless, do not rejoice because the spirits submit to you. Rejoice instead that your names are written in heaven.”

Jesus warned the disciples that it could be a difficult and challenging task. The message of the Kingdom of God was a dramatic change from the beliefs of the day, and not automatically accepted.

Today, it is hard to picture someone taking off on a mission trip or for that matter any trip with nothing but the clothes on their back. We would at least need emergency money, a credit card, and a change of clothes. Yet Jesus is saying that those hearing the good news will take care of the basic needs of the disciples.

A part of verse 7 (⁷Remain in this house, eating and drinking whatever they set before you, for workers deserve their pay.) stuck out to me. I do not know about any of you, but I am somewhat of a finicky eater. Eating whatever is served does not impress me. For example, I do not like Asian foods, which is any food that ends with an “ese.” If I am with a group that is eating at Hunan’s in Carroll (a Chinese restaurant), I will order a burger and fries. Yes, the list is much longer. Yet there are a number of foods that I will eat that may surprise some of you.

I do understand that there are times to be gracious and set aside personal preferences. You just hold your breath and take a bite.

One of the commentators on the text suggested the possibility of some of the disciples going into gentile territories where the people did not have the same religious beliefs about clean and unclean food. If that were so, those disciples would be breaking their tradition. Interesting thought.

The 70 or 72 were just following instructions, and when they returned, they had many great things to share.

The Old Testament lesson from 2 Kings has a powerful man who did not think that he had to follow instructions that he thought was demeaning to a man of his stature. There are two named persons in the story, the prophet Elisha and the Aram general Naaman. Aram is the ancient name for what is now Syria. There are several unnamed persons who are important in the story. Let us now hear the story of the healing of Naaman by the prophet Elisha:

Old Testament Lesson 2 Kings 5:1-14 (CEB)
Naaman is Healed

5 Naaman, a general for the king of Aram, was a great man and highly regarded by his master, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. This man was a mighty warrior, but he had a skin disease.² Now Aramean raiding parties had gone out and captured a young girl from the land of Israel. She served Naaman’s wife.

³ She said to her mistress, “I wish that my master could come before the prophet who lives in Samaria. He would cure him of his skin disease.”⁴ So Naaman went and told his master what the young girl from the land of Israel had said.

⁵ Then Aram’s king said, “Go ahead. I will send a letter to Israel’s king.”

So Naaman left. He took along ten kikkars of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing. ⁶ He brought the letter to Israel's king. It read, "Along with this letter I am sending you my servant Naaman so you can cure him of his skin disease."

⁷ When the king of Israel read the letter, he ripped his clothes. He said, "What? Am I God to hand out death and life? But this king writes me, asking me to cure someone of his skin disease! You must realize that he wants to start a fight with me."

⁸ When Elisha the man of God heard that Israel's king had ripped his clothes, he sent word to the king: "Why did you rip your clothes? Let the man come to me. Then he will know that there is a prophet in Israel."

⁹ Naaman arrived with his horses and chariots. He stopped at the door of Elisha's house. ¹⁰ Elisha sent out a messenger who said, "Go and wash seven times in the Jordan River. Then your skin will be restored and become clean."

¹¹ But Naaman went away in anger. He said, "I thought for sure that he would come out, stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the bad spot, and cure the skin disease. ¹² Are not the rivers in Damascus, the Abana and the Pharpar, better than all Israel's waters? Could not I wash in them and get clean?" So he turned away and proceeded to leave in anger.

¹³ Naaman's servants came up to him and spoke to him: "Our father, if the prophet had told you to do something difficult, would not you have done it? All he said to you was, 'Wash and become clean.'" ¹⁴ So Naaman went down and bathed in the Jordan seven times, just as the man of God had said. His skin was restored like that of a young boy, and he became clean.

May God bless our hearing of his holy word. Amen.

Note: A kikkar is worth something over a million dollars today.

Brian Jones wrote: The story of the healing of Naaman is about entitlement, power, and pride.

It is about the shame attached to a chronic and visible bodily abnormality. And it is about divine power that flows through humble channels rather than through the pomp and power that human's esteem.

A key detail of the story is that Naaman was a leper. But leprosy then and now are different conditions. The Hebrew term translated 'leprosy' is *tzara'ath*. It refers to skin blemishes and eruptions that rendered one ritually unclean and, consequently, resulted in social stigma and exclusion. The term does not refer to Hansen's disease, commonly referred to today as leprosy, a disfiguring and disabling bacterial disease. Although the Bible gives remarkably precise descriptions of *tzara'ath*, we are not certain of the nature of the skin conditions to which the term referred. It probably referred to more than one: fungal infections, leukoderma (see verse 27), impetigo, psoriasis, and eczema are all possibilities. Leviticus chapters 13–14 provides instructions for determining a leprous condition and segregating those so afflicted. It also specifies the rituals of cleansing and reintegration, should the condition be resolved.

Surprisingly, even walls and clothing could have *tzara'ath*, in which cases the term probably referred to fungus or mold. The important point is that it was an obvious skin condition and indicated ritual uncleanness and possible divine judgement, as the sacrifices specified for cleansing indicate (Leviticus 14:10–32; see 2 Samuel 3:29). Touching a leper made one unclean, just as touching a human corpse or carrion did. Lepers were marked and excluded so that they would not transmit ritual impurity. Avoiding the spread of disease contagion is a modern concept, and most of the skin conditions categorized as “*tzara'ath*” would not have been communicable.

Who were some of the unnamed persons in this story? It begins with an Israeli slave girl, then to Naaman's wife, then the King of Aram, then the King of Israel, then Elisha's messenger (who later find that his name is Gehazi), and finally Naaman's servants.

The slave girl who was kidnapped from her home and was taken to Aram to serve in Naaman's home had every reason to say “good for you” now that you have that dreaded skin disease. And yet she was willing to send Naaman in a direction that would lead to his healing. It just shows that a person considered insignificant can make a difference by be willing to speak up. She starts a chain reaction unknowingly.

Naaman's wife was willing to pass the information along to her husband. It was important for her that he maintain his status.

Then Naaman went to the King of Aram, who agreed to send him to Israel with a large treasure trove to buy the healing of this great general.

The next stop was Israel for Naaman along with his entourage going to the King. The King panics and thinks that the King of Aram is picking a fight. Elisha hears of the meeting and sends a messenger to have Naaman go to the prophet's place.

There are no pictures of Elisha's house, but somehow you get the feeling it was little more than a shack.

When Naaman arrived at the prophet's home he was not only suffering from the dreaded skin disease but was also suffering from a severely overly inflated ego.

Naaman was a great warrior and is the head commander of the army of Aram. He appeared to be in direct contact with the king himself. It mentioned that he was held in high favor by some high-ranking folks which makes one think that Naaman was a guy who enjoyed a lot of high-fives!

I do not think ego is always a bad thing. It refers to your sense of self and your sense of self-importance. If we had no ego, we would have no appreciation of who we are as a person. If we had no ego, we would have no real sense of what we can do nor who we are called to be as God's beloved.

But overly inflated egos are dangerous because they tend to puff us up to the point in which we are blinded to the realities around us and always about ready to pop.

He expected Elisha to greet him with open arms and perform some kind of ritual. Instead, a messenger is sent out to tell Naaman to go and wash in the Jordan River seven times.

He had a temper tantrum and wanted to return home, but his servants calmed him down and he did what he was told. When he followed instructions, a miracle took place as he was healed.

As you continue to read the story of Naaman, he changed and became a follower of the God of Abraham and was much more humble.

Thanks be to God who grants healing and blessings in all the rivers of Earth. Amen.