

“Receiving from the edge”, a sermon based on 2 Kings 5:1-14 and Luke 10:1-11, 16-20, preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 7 July 2019.

Two stories of power and powerlessness.

A powerful general learns the limits of power when his body fails and a powerless faithful slave girl exercises what little influence she has to help him be healed.

Seventy peripheral people in the edgy Jesus movement go out and bestow peace on the houses they enter, relying entirely on the hospitality of those to whom they go.

Two stories.

Stormin Norman, or Naaman, army commander, mighty warrior, highly favoured victor, friend of the King – with a skin disease, not leprosy as we know it. And a nameless young girl, captive, trafficked, enslaved, who tells Naaman’s wife that Naaman should go to the prophet in Samaria. Naaman has plenty of resources. So when he goes to be healed, he takes money, wealth, clothes, a letter from the king of Aram to the king of Israel. That’s how army commanders work, king to king, commander to commander – we know that doesn’t work with illness. The king of Israel doesn’t want anything to do with healing and it all sounds suspicious.

The prophet Elisha hears about it and says - send him along. So Naaman goes, with horses and chariots, lots of stuff again, and waits at the door of Elisha’s house. Elisha doesn’t even invite him in, simply sends a message that Naaman wash in the Jordan river seven times. Now Naaman has high rank with commensurate expectations, that the prophet will welcome him, wave his hand over his body, cure the leprosy. When the prophet won’t do it, or even deign to open the door, Naaman leaves in a rage, ranting that the rivers of Damascus are better than the rivers of Israel. What a dirty grubby shallow inconsequential creek the Jordan is.

Naaman's servants calm him down – they know their commander – if he had asked you to do something difficult you would have done it – they say - just because it's easy you won't do it. Naaman relents, washing himself in the Jordan river and his body is restored. The powerless bring peace to the powerful.

Luke tells of Jesus sending seventy in pairs. A chapter earlier he had sent the twelve, perhaps as a trial run. And they learned a few things as a result, that not everyone will welcome you or what you have. After all, you go as powerless people, lambs among wolves. You are not to take wealth of any kind – no purse, no bag, no sandals, no props, no ready-made religious answers, no package, no promises – nothing. You go as a slave girl to the commander's wife.

When you go, you are to rely entirely on the hospitality of those to whom you go, eating what is provided, receiving what is given. And if your hosts are people of peace, when you offer peace it will remain. When the town welcomes you, and enables you to serve, say to them that “the kingdom of God has come near to you.” And if the town does not welcome you or enable you to serve there, then say “the kingdom of God has come near to you.” Either way you communicate that the realm of God has come near. And if they don't welcome you, don't worry. Don't react. Simply shake off the experience like dust off your feet. Move on.

The seventy is us. Luke names who we are and what we are for. The church is a body where we empower each other to go to town, to bless people with peace, to name the presence of the reign of God. I can see you looking for your bulletin – I thought this was a Presbyterian Church, not the Mormons. The image of the body is often used to describe the church - a moving, evolving organism, Spirit led, walking the road, on the way conversing with the pilgrim Jesus. We are labourers in God's harvest. Not salespeople, not marketers, not people who sell the gospel or the church. We are fellow workers in a field rich with possibilities for God's world to emerge. A world in which God is growing the reign of God, in which the Spirit of God is generating life, in which peace waits to break out.

And Jesus says to us, travel light. One of the gifts of our age is that society has stripped us of secular privilege and power. Our faith is but one in the marketplace of faiths. We are but one tweet in a twitter universe, one page on a world-wide web, one voice in a loud conversation.

The wonderful gift is that we are thereby back in the gospel: 70 lambs before wolves. With Naaman powerless before illness. With the young woman whispering a word of hope. With 70 vulnerable neighbours offering neighbourly vulnerability. Not expecting people to come because we are here, instead going because people are there.

Last year at a party, a mother told me of her son, a student, who also worked in a care facility. He noticed that a church group would come to the facility every week. They didn't do anything in particular. They would interact as friends with those in care. There was nothing in it for them. He wondered why they did this. Being a student, he went to the library to look for a book that might help him understand. He found a very good book, Richard Hays – The Ethics of the New Testament. He was captivated. He told his mother she needed to read it. And when his atheistic father criticised Christianity, he told him to read it. The kingdom of God came near.

The call is to bestow peace. To do so, we need to travel light. Take little with you. With others as equals, live authentically, live deeply, live in Christ. Engage in community, in what brings justice, in doing the work of the gospel.

A minister told this story.

After worship one Sunday an elder pulled the minister aside. He had visited the local hospital the day before and discovered that a young couple in the church had just had a baby: a little girl born with a disability. "Pastor, I didn't know what to say," the elder told me. "I spend a few minutes with them. They let me hold her and I told them she was beautiful. . . . Pastor, I didn't know what to say." He went on to describe how he had prayed, thanking God for their child and asking God's peace and blessing on their family.

I told him that I thought he had done what elders are supposed to do, that his words and gestures were apt and kind, and that I could not have thought of anything better to say.

A couple of weeks later this elder again pulled me aside and showed me a note from the young mother. She thanked him for his visit and his prayer, and then she concluded her note: "Thank you for not saying what so many people said and telling us how sorry you were. We are so happy to have our baby. Thank you for sharing our family's joy."

"That's great," I said. "But Pastor, can you imagine people telling them how sorry they were?" "Well," I said, "I guess they just didn't know what to say." Our elder knew what to say even when he didn't know he knew what to say. He knew how to claim a child as a citizen of the kingdom of God and to announce God's peace to her household. Nothing else needed to be said.

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