

Muck

2 Kings 5:1-14
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

4 Pentecost 2019
7 July 2019

I trust you all had a safe and enjoyable 4th of July holiday. In the days of my misbegotten youth, most 4ths of July were celebrated at Gramma and Grandpa Smith's cottage on Hess Lake, not far from here, by Newaygo. I have told you of the tragic consequences of some of those celebrations – one in particular having to do with fireworks and Gramma's woodpecker tree. Fireworks were a common denominator of those festivals and nothing beat the hilarity of shocking an unsuspecting sister with a well-placed Blackcat firecracker. Screeching with all the rage she could muster while chasing me at a dead run, Linda, the sister in question, was hot on my heels all the way out to the end of Grandpa's dock. More agile than I am now, I dodged her last desperate grasp for my neck and stopped. Linda didn't, diving head first into 2 feet of turgid water and 2 more feet of cold, black, slimy muck. When she emerged, luminescent green slime hung like a long, misshapen wig from her muck-plastered face. Black goo slithered down her back while great gobs catapulted off her flailing arms. Epithets unseemly for an adolescent girl of that time sprayed from her enraged lips along with shards of whatever decaying life forms lay rotting in that primordial ooze. Linda was not pleased.

Somehow the revulsion Naaman expressed about bathing in the Jordan River reminded me of that special 4th of July, lo these many years ago. The Jordan, so I am told, is a muddy, mucky river down by Jericho. Naaman's story, like the one where Jesus sent the demons into a herd of pigs and ran them off the cliff into the abyss, is told in such a way as to make Lutherans smile out loud. We are supposed to get a chuckle out of the fact that this high, mucky-muck (pun fully intended), a foreign general of an enemy army is clued in by an Israelite slave girl. He is subsequently instructed by this wild-haired Israelite prophet, who doesn't even come out to greet him, to bathe, not once, but seven times, in the muck of the Jordan River. This he is to do in order to cure his leprosy. Naaman, whose name ironically means, "loveliness," is not pleased.

Can you blame him? I mean, here's a guy who was used to having people wait on him hand and foot and jump to his every command. He was a man of great prestige, despite his unfortunate skin disease. He had friends in high places and carried a letter of introduction signed by the king of Syria to prove it. It was bad enough he had to seek help from lesser state like Israel. Then to be told by some unseen prophet to wash seven times in a river so choked with silt that not even animals wouldn't drink from it – well, it was too much. I can understand why Naaman was not pleased. However, he is once again convinced by logic. How hard could it be? You have already come all this way. Why not give it a try?

Of course, Naaman's leprosy, a blanket description for a multitude of skin diseases, was healed and the moral of the story is that the God of Israel is God beyond the boundaries of those who call upon God's name and a God who shows mercy to Israel's enemies, even if a little humble mud pie comes with the deal.

That said and beyond the humorous gloss, there is a scratchy underside to this story of divine benevolence. Naaman, remember, is an enemy. The threat posed by a failure to heal his disease was enough to make the king of Israel, as Charlie Brown would say, "**rent his garments.**" There is enmity between Israel and Syria, a situation that hasn't changed much in 2700 years. Though the text doesn't say so directly, we are to understand that Elisha did indeed call upon the name of the Lord – on Naaman's behalf, on behalf of an enemy.

How would we have reacted in Elisha's place? The opportunity to show off the power of our Lord notwithstanding, how would we have responded to the invitation to do good to an enemy with no

expectation that any kindnesses thus proffered may only be rewarded by something far more lethal than a Black Cat firecracker tossed in your direction.

I have asked myself that question many times this past week. Though Jesus himself adjures us to pray for our enemies, I sometimes find it hard to do so in any way that I fear the Lord had in mind. I mean, praying that Aaron Miller, my former political opponent, fall off a dock into 2 feet of muck is probably not what the Good Lord recommended -- I don't think. That's the point. Jesus doesn't make it easy for us. **"Love your enemies"** is never commanded with the qualifier, **"Only if they promise to be nice to afterwards."** Rather, it's, **"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you – do good to those who hate you."**

Today's gospel recounts Jesus' commissioning of the "70." I guess his small band of 12 expanded somewhat. Anyway, he sends them out, as the text says, like lambs among wolves, **"to every town and place where he himself intended to go."** We don't know where he intended to go, but we know where he has been. He has been to Samaria, Judah's archrivals to the north. Judean and Samaritans hated each other. Preaching the kingdom of God there was like a Hatfield trying to give away tickets to the McCoy Family reunion. Jesus had been to Tyre and Sidon, the onetime home of Naaman, the leper. Jesus had been to the Greek cities of the Decapolis and beyond, where he encountered the Garasene demoniac. Jesus had been to many places where he did not expect a prophet's welcome. Yet, the good news of the gospel was proclaimed there. Illnesses were cured there. Demons were exorcized there. He tells them to do the business of the gospel wherever they are, accepting hospitality where they find it and, even if they have to shake inhospitable dust off their sandals, still proclaim that the kingdom of God has come near – has come near to them, wherever they are.

That's why the gospel is a challenge for us. On patriotic holidays, like the 4th of July, we are given to singing songs of national pride and giving thanks to God for special status among the people of this planet. Even in a time of continued economic struggle for many in this county, nagging unemployment, and the persistence of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, we know we are among the most blessed people of all time. We also know that many people on the planet envy us - and hate us.

I don't know that displays of military might on Independence Day are the best way to win the hearts and mind of our enemies. I do know that the pyrotechnics that a desperate zealot straps to one's body or stuffs into a car bomb are not adolescent jokes. We have enemies, both personal and collective and it would be so easy to clothe the other in the muck of our prejudice and fear and loathing. It would be so easy for us to pray that God rain down some heavenly cherry bombs on those who would kill not only our soldiers, but our innocent civilians and children. It would be soo easy, but God calls us, adjures, begs us to pray for our enemies and do good to those that hate us. Why? Because we can. Because we, as declared at the beginning of this service, are forgiven. Because we are instructed by our own foundational prayer to forgive those who trespass against us.

Our national holidays an opportunity for us to hold together all three most important values: God, family and country. They also give an opportunity to feel the tension between them. Our God calls us to reach beyond love of family and loyalty to country in order that we might see in the very different and often hostile "other" a bit of ourselves and fellow child of God, one to whom the kingdom has drawn near.

Let us pray,

Holy God, Lord of all nations and all peoples, we struggle to love those we do not know and forgive those who have hurt us. Give us we pray, a measure of your Spirit, a spirit of love and forgiveness that both restores our hope and gives us courage to let go of anger and fear. While granting us wisdom to protect ourselves from harm, grant us the peace to quench the flames of revenge. Help us gracious God in our struggle to be the people you call us to be in the name of the one we call Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen