

Sunday November 13, 2022  
Lesson 11: Working for Abiding Peace  
Scripture: 2 Kings 5: 1-19

**Context:**

This fall we continue our series titled “Freedom.” We continue with our unit of the series, “Faithful Conversations.” The focus of the unit will be on how we have neighborly conversations with those different than us who might be outside our comfort zones. Today’s scripture lesson comes from the Old Testament with the book of 2 Kings and the story of Naaman, a general for the king of Aram, and Elisha the prophet. The purpose of today’s lesson will be to learn from scripture of ways to live in peace with people from other faith traditions.

The prophet Elisha (and his predecessor the prophet Elijah) were known for their interactions with those outside the community of Israelites. Today’s story includes Elisha interacting with Naaman, a general for the king of Aram. There is a fruitful symbiosis between narrative art and theology in this text.<sup>1</sup> The story told includes someone with a problem in need of a miracle, various individuals who help further the plot, and then a climax with a surprise. Alongside the plot, we discover more about how God works in mysterious ways and reveals things which surprised the ancient reader as well as us today.

The narrative begins with a man of high virtue who is praised by his master, a king. The man is loyal and willing to serve well. Yet his plight in life is carrying a skin disease known as leprosy. There were various levels of the disease. In this case, Naaman’s was one of the minor types which created no barriers to being able to converse and be with others.<sup>2</sup> He continues to be a valiant soldier and faithfully serves his king.

A solution comes in an unusual place as a young girl who has become a slave goes to serve Naaman’s wife. She speaks of a prophet in Samaria who could cure him and make him whole. Naaman relates this to his master who will do anything to help this faithful servant and sends him to the king.

As the king of Israel grieves the inability to perform a miracle and feels he is set up, Elisha interferes and has the king send him Naaman. Yet the miracle offered to him is not what Naaman expects as simply bathing in a river does not sound promising. In fact he is insulted as he has an ethnocentric objection, making a derogatory point about the river as opposed to mightier waters.<sup>3</sup> Once again, the foil to the story comes through servants who insist he try.

He is amazed after following the prophet’s instructions. His skin is restored! Naaman returns to Elisha with two consequences: he will become a monotheist and he will ask for forgiveness as he supports his king who worships other gods.<sup>4</sup> Yet instead of chastising him, Elisha says the words “Go in peace.” Several miracles have taken place in one event!

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<sup>1</sup> Nelson, Richard D. “First and Second Kings.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 176.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

## Application

Do you remember the first time you met someone of a different faith tradition? Many of us could probably name people we know who are not religious or those who are irregular church attenders. In today's day and time, it might even be hard to ask questions or discern the faith of a person. Even still, most of us might be curious when we meet someone of a different religious tradition.

I think the most tangible time I remember meeting someone of a different faith tradition was in middle school. I probably knew of other people in elementary school and whatnot but was not at an age to understand or ask those questions. My parents and teachers had talked about people who were Muslim or Jewish or Buddhist, but I had never had the opportunity to meet someone. This changed when I was in middle school and went to the library at one time to discover a student reading a book. It was odd as I knew the student and how their class went to lunch at the time. I came to find out the student was Muslim, and as they began the season of Ramadan, they fasted during the day. This peer went to the library so they would not have to watch as others ate, and so they might themselves might be tempted to break the fast, an important spiritual discipline during this season for those of the Islamic tradition.

What of course made this even more interesting was how this was during the time following September 11 and I had heard all sorts of things about Muslims and this faith tradition from the news outlets and even various Christian sources. There were preconceived notions and stereotypes galore at the time and fear was a real thing. Did we really know and trust our neighbors, especially those who practiced a different faith tradition than us?

As I read of our scripture reading today, I cannot help but think of all the stereotypes and assumptions people of faith make of those in different religious traditions. It is often very commonplace for us to connect fear and anxiety to those who are different. And in some cases, we can even assume certain people who practice a certain faith tradition in a particular area are lesser than us. Just as Naaman about the suggestion to receive a cure from a river in what was regarded as a tiny nation with a paranoid king and prophets who went around in strange clothes, claiming to be the voice of one God (an anomaly of the day.)

Yet what God does in today's scripture lesson reveals to us how we are called to live in peace with those who practice faith differently than us. In the case of Naaman's conversion, he had to live alongside the king he had vowed to serve. This king of course was most likely not going to begin worshipping the God called Yahweh as this would have caused a tinder box to explode with the people of Aram. Thus, Naaman asks for forgiveness for going to the temples with his master and supporting him in worship. Elisha says the words "Go in peace."

This prophet called by God doesn't tell Naaman to take his king out. He does not tell him to go and lecture his king on how he's getting it wrong. He does not condemn Naaman for talking and fraternizing with someone who worships in a different faith tradition. He says "Go in peace," another way of saying and go and be at peace with those around you.

Today's world often delights in the differences between various groups of people and sometimes not in the best of ways. There is the belief our side, our view, and our beliefs must be the same for others. Instead of letting God lead in terms of convicting hearts and minds, we overstep our bounds when we choose routes where we choose war or unnecessary conflict with those of different religious backgrounds. Time and time again, the scriptures remind us we are called to be a people of peace, seeking the best of those around us. There are people of various backgrounds who will always use faith as a tool for power, whatever tradition they may be: Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and the list goes on and on. Yet for us, as disciples of Jesus Christ,

we are called to come and go as a people of peace.

Who are people you know of different faith backgrounds, if any? How can you learn more about various faith traditions so you can be better informed about what people believe in? Why does Elisha and Jesus remind us to live in peace with those different than us? What are ways you can partner with people of different faith traditions for the betterment of your community? What does it mean to be a person full of the peace of Christ?

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