

“Summer Agenda”

Sermon by Rev. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
July 3, 2016

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

Naaman was accustomed to high regard. As a great warrior, he had prevailed over armies in battle. The King, Aram, respected him, as Naaman had secured repeated victories for the king. Naaman knew struggle, but he also knew authority, prestige, and reward. Even his household bore the mark of his conquests, as his wife's own servant girl was a spoil of war. However, there is one thing Naaman's military prowess and prestige could not conquer. Because of his skin disease, his was an abject body; he would have been a social castoff, deprived of the connection and belonging that make life meaningful. Much like the AIDS victims of the 80's, his body would have posed a threat and fear as his sores leaked that which should be contained inside the body to the outside. For Naaman, even though he had plenty of power and riches, he probably had no sense of shared connection and belonging.

Naaman's wife's young servant would have known what it means to be deprived of the connection and belonging that make life meaningful; she herself had been taken from her home in Israel, held captive in a raid by Naaman himself. Yet because she had once experienced that connection and belonging, she is able to summon the compassion to lead Naaman to find that for himself. The girl suggests the Israeli prophet Elisha to offer healing to Naaman's body.

In an appeal sent by messenger to the King of Israel, asking for the prophet's healing, the Israeli King tears his clothes in despair, reading the letter as a call to war instead of a plea for healing. I wonder how many of us have also heard the challenge to fight in the words of loved ones when they were really just asking for healing and help.

When Elisha sent the message to Naaman that he should dip into the Jordan River seven times, Naaman stormed away angrily. Who can blame him? A man of his prestige should expect a cure as prestigious-- if not to be cured by Elisha himself waving his hands over Naaman's sores, then perhaps an immersion in a more well-known body of water. Naaman expected the dazzling mists of Niagara Falls, but instead he got the muddied waters of the Hackensack River.

His ego made him storm away, nearly forgetting about a cure, but his servants-- who perhaps knew something about holiness showing up in humble places-- urged him to try it. After all, what does he have to lose? Go ahead. Take a bath.

The text describes Naaman as going down and immersing himself in the Jordan. In addition to the physical posture of lowering oneself, the Hebrew also implies that Naaman humbled himself before the people he had once conquered, and their God. His flesh was restored to that of a young boy. His body could once again become a location for connection and belonging, a place where God's love might be experienced and understood.

We do not always need to look at abject bodies as the ones in need of healing. Sometimes, it is a community itself that needs the practice of immersion and conversion. In the Belgian town of Geel, healing happens within the locus of a community rather than in the experience of one particular body. For over 700 years, households in Geel have had a tradition of welcoming guests with mental illness among them, while these guests receive treatment from the psychiatric professionals in the area. To the people of Geel, treating the insane meant to simply live with them, share their work and their distractions." Disruptive or disturbing behaviors are met with creative and compassionate solutions, such as with the man who hallucinated lions coming through the walls. His host would simply pretend to chase the lions away-- and that would work, every time¹.

Jesus' agenda for the seventy he sends out relies on the importance of hospitality. The impact of Jesus' agenda for his messengers in Luke can be summed up by this: create spaces of connection and belonging where God's love is at the center.

I have lived in and travelled to many new places. I have found it takes time to create these spaces and belongings where God's love is at the center. The first time I ever moved to New York City, I was 22 years old. I lived in a neighborhood where there was a lot of public commentary on what I wore each day to my job as an Intern at The Presbyterian United Nations Office. It was so bad, that if I didn't get catcalls from the neighborhood men, I would think, "wow, I must look really frumpy today." I mostly rolled with it because there was no Amy Schumer at the time to frame my experience into a larger feminist narrative of dissent. However, a couple of times I encountered a man who made especially rude and frightening comments about my appearance; indeed, he

¹ Angus Chen, "For Centuries, A Small Town Has Embraced Strangers With Mental Illness" on *National Public Radio*, July 1, 2016

made me feel like a lamb among wolves. I lamented these experiences with my friend Debra, who is a streetwise New York City native. She told me, “You know why that is right? I watch you walking as we talk right now. Everyone we pass on the sidewalk, you smile and nod your head. That is such an invitation!” I quickly learned a reversal of my Southern ways; I learned *not* to greet people I passed on the streets and to save my friendly gestures for the shopkeepers and stoopdwellers I had come to know and trust in my neighborhood. **But in time, I found ways-- like so many New Yorkers do-- to have both the invisible wall that protects my personal space, and find ways of letting people in to reach my personal life to form those spaces of connection and belonging where God's love can be active.**

Jesus also instructed the seventy he sent out not to greet anyone in the street. But their mission was not one of avoidance. In fact, they were to stay with strangers and receive hospitality from them. They travelled without purse, possessions or even sandals for their feet, so they were utterly dependent on the generosity of people they encountered for the first time. What an interesting batch of recruits those earliest Christians must have been to have welcomed shoeless freegan² evangelists into their homes. How interesting that the first act of invitation to Jesus' love involved putting upon others these bodily needs for food and for a space to rest.

Korean language and culture has an important concept that is a powerful bond between people. It is the notion of *jeong*, (*TSUNG*) which means love-- and so much more. One Korean-American dictionary describes *jeong* as “feeling, love, sentiment, passion, heart, sympathy, and attachment.”³ To describe it more personally, I use this example given by Esther K. Chae in a TedTalk:

When I was a graduate student at Yale Drama, I would fly back once a year to Seoul to visit my parents, relatives and family. I would have to immediately make a round of formal house greetings to my hal-muh-nee (grandma) and elders. And yes, just like any and all grandmas of the world, feeding me was her way of showing me her jeong. I remember as a child looking up at my parents for help with pleading eyes and a belly ready to burst when hal-muh-nee would be annoyed that I was supposedly full and was refusing her third helping.

Things did not change just because I was older, visiting from abroad and an acting student. I remember that particular visit with hal-muh-nee, I wasn't staying long. I told

² The term *freegan* is slang for somebody who makes their way through life by getting free stuff.

³ Christopher K. Chung, M.D. & Samson Cho, M.Dm, “Significance of “Jeong” in Korean Culture and Psychotherapy”

her that I might not be able to visit again before I left Korea. She asked when I would be back. 'Maybe in a year?'

She stopped eating her soup with rice in it. We sat silently for a while. She ate another spoonful of rice, stirred the remaining in the bowl and then pushed it in front of me. I ate the remaining and finished her bowl of soggy rice. I started to feel my eyes and heart welling. I understood that she wanted the same nourishment to be inside my body and become flesh and bone that would connect me and her. That was her way of infusing me with her great jeong.⁴

So, when those disciples traveled to spread the word of Jesus and the love of God, their home stays built *jeong* with their hosts. The shared experience, attachment, and mutual care brought an incarnational experience of Jesus' body, even when Jesus' body was not physically present. In the act of sharing the ordinary things of feeding, and housing, those earliest messengers of Jesus' good news showed how God's love can be made manifest.

Cultivating *jeong* is perhaps one of the most important things our church can offer. We will get plenty of people visiting our church, looking for a knock-out experience of the Holy Spirit, or sermons that make the listeners swoon because of their holy insight, or music that consistently sends chills down the spine. Depending on the day, they may experience glimpses of any of these things. But I am pretty sure that if they come expecting the same kind of grand experience Namaan anticipated for his healing, they may leave disappointed.

What our church can offer, and I think consistently so, is an experience of *jeong*: a space for shared connection and belonging that nourishes the ground for God's love to take root and grow. Whether visitors or long-term members, those who come to church and feel some kind of experience of *jeong* offered by the Christians around them will be more open to the healing and transformation God's love can provide.

What does it mean to you to make this space of worship a space where connection and belonging happens? How can God lead you to offer it? How can God humble you enough to seek it? How many lives can be healed and transformed as we find Jesus' body present in the sharing we offer? I wonder. Amen.

Minute for Mission: Today we will commission volunteer builders for our 2 Habitat for Humanity service days this month. In building housing for low-income families, we are

⁴ Esther K. Chae, "Got Jeong?" on TedFellows website, <http://fellowsblog.ted.com/2012/01/31/got-jeong-by-esther-k-chaе> Jan. 31, 2012

hoping to create spaces where people who have been on the margins because of their poverty might find a deeper sense of connection and belonging. As their new homes become locations for care for the body, for food and rest and healing, may they also feel nurtured and transformed by God's love.