

Sermon for Proper 9

RCL Lectionary, Year C

[2 Kings 5:1-14](#) / [Psalm 30](#) / [Galatians 6:\(1-6\), 7-16](#) / [Luke 10:1-11, 16-20](#)

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

July 4th, 2010

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

Naaman Meets the Fourth of July

This Sunday is one of the rare Sundays that happen to coincide with Independence Day, the day of this country's birth. It's tempting to start waxing eloquent like David McCullough or any number of contemporary American historians about that fateful July fourth in 1776 when a group of esteemed men representing thirteen colonies gathered in the sultry setting of a Philadelphia summer, threw all caution to the winds and signed the Declaration of Independence. They were either all dead, foolish rebels or timeless, immortal heroes in their own right. We like to remember them for the wide variety of character and their astute vision: for instance the brilliance of Jefferson, the genius of Franklin, the passionate rhetoric of Adams. We project onto them our very best hopes and dreams, though few if any of them had much of a detailed idea about what they were starting. . . and whether or not they would be able to finish what they had begun. Some of them were savvy enough to recognize the British army and navy – one of the greatest military forces the world had known to that time – was likely to come down on their heads. In some ways it had already started. They talked of great things like individual liberty and the pursuit of happiness while some of them – unreflectively in practical ways, it seems – owned slaves and no women were there to swear at the King and sign under John Hancock's large letters (large perhaps like Saint Paul's!). Some of our contemporaries imagine them as Christian men in whatever flavor is most desirable, when these rebels actually represented not only our Church of England progenitors, but a ragtag, diverse cluster of faiths that had made America their sojourn from hostile conditions in Europe: pragmatic Congregationalists, Presbyterians, a couple of Unitarians. There was even a Catholic from Maryland. And some were not as thoroughgoing "Christian" as we'd like to think they were. Many of them were influenced and led to varying degrees by Deism, that skeptical reasoned faith of the enlightenment. Remember that Jefferson chopped up his own version of the gospels to suit his own intellectual rigor. Franklin, born and baptized a Congregationalist, occasionally attended church as an Anglican while living in Quaker country, and would probably rather fly kites in lightning storms than pray for a miracle.

The Declaration itself, as hallowed as it amongst our national treasures, was a political document, a contentious late draft born of a messy democratic process amongst learned men who furiously argued philosophically and politically. We might claim this week, as the reputation of one of the officially declared saints of The Episcopal Church – the late Thurgood Marshall – was crudely raked over the coals in a Senate judicial nomination hearing. . . We might claim that for this reason we live in the worst of partisan times. But partisanship was not just nascent, but alive and kicking in the latter eighteenth-

century process that broke our ties with Britain. It was also at work in the founding of our Church by some of the same people who several years later were helping draft the United States Constitution. Like any birth, the birth of our country was messy, painful, and far from perfect. And it didn't get any cleaner as time wore on, no matter how much we look through the biased lenses of historians or the rhetoric of our politicians, right or left, at the past two-and-a-half centuries.

We know our own imperfections as a country all too well, from clinging to the institution of slavery to struggling over women's suffrage and civil rights, to carpetbaggers, robber barons, and Jim Crow, to the Trail of Tears, to the destruction of peoples and lands whose history and life we will never fully recover. We have, too, our great Presidents and Civil Rights leaders, our courageous stand against tyranny on two fronts simultaneously in the last century, our expanding liberties and insistence on an impartial system of laws and balances. We know our great scientific achievements – miracles in their own right that would have probably awestruck even the seventy disciples returning from their own miraculous adventures in today's Gospel. We've taken on agricultural innovations to feed millions at home and shared it to feed billions abroad; we've made medical advances unprecedented in human history, and we harbor a feisty economic and political inventiveness that remain an envy of the rest of the world. Our citizens invented the cotton gin, the light bulb, and the airplane. We also invented the atomic weapon. We are rude and daring as a people. We've landed on the moon and told dictators to take a hike. We've cut exploration to favor pork and subsidized tyranny abroad. We are strong in our diversity and sometimes ignorant in our parochialism. We are simple in our patriotism and complicated in our politics. We are human, fallible, and mortal, and yet we stand on the shoulders of ideas and sacrifices that outlive us all. For all our foibles, freedom marches on, and how easily we forget what makes that possible! And so we ask God to bless our country, both in secular speech and in houses of worship like this one this morning, still enjoying the freedom of our faith, speech, and heritage that rests very close to the heart of who we are as a country, as a people.

But what do we mean by "God bless America?" Is it just a patriotic sound bite or something more? This is where the history takes a back seat and the sermon begins for me this morning, and where we come face-to-face with our ancient Scriptural texts written in anything but a democratic milieu. They have something profound to tell us about why we invoke a divine blessing on our country this day – and it may not be for the reasons we think.

Perhaps at times we in this country can be like Naaman. . . Naaman, a great warrior, towering and strong we can imagine him. . . Naaman who knew his own victories and prowess well. He was the pride of the King of Aram, and even the King of Israel feared this great warrior's presence and what it might mean for his uneasy peace with the more powerful Arameans. Naaman commanded respect – and probably fear – just about everywhere he went. Only thing was, Naaman harbored a weakness – a dirty little secret. He had leprosy – while we don't know exactly what this meant in today's medical terms – we know it was some kind of dreaded skin disease. In the ancient world it would have been a sign of impurity, a lack of wholeness, a sign of weakness – all deadly to a great warrior's pride if not his standing and reputation. Naaman probably kept it quiet, just like we in our patriotic pride sometimes keep quiet our own weaknesses and impurities, our own messy history and our imperfect realities as a people. So

Naaman finally decided to do something about his problem and gets permission from his King to go seek a man of God to heal him.

Only thing is, Naaman thinks like we often do in contemporary American society. That, given the means, we can buy what we want. So he packs the nicest clothes and a great deal of money, and plans to buy Elisha's favor with it – and in turn purchase God's blessing.

Do we say, "God bless America" because we think we deserve it or have earned it? Sometimes it seems like we do. The ironic twist on this is we are then no better than our ancient ancestors who believed enough blood sacrificed or enough gold offered to the gods would curry divine favor. The thing is, God does not operate this way. God cannot be bought. And so Naaman is shocked by the cool reception he gets when he arrives at Elisha's door, and the great prophet who has inherited a double-share of Elijah's spirit doesn't even grant the legendary warrior an audience. He sends a servant to meet him instead. Adding insult to injury, he tells Naaman to go bathe in the Jordan. It's so far beneath Naaman's dignity to dip himself in that trickle of a stream that he nearly leaves in disgust. Leprosy he can deal with, but not the disdain of prophets.

Naaman's challenge is our challenge as Americans. When we say "God bless America," we too easily forget that we say this not because we fully deserve God's blessing, nor because we can pay for it, nor because we've earned it like Solomon Smith Barney doing it the old fashioned way (remember those commercials?). . . We invoke God's blessing because we *need* it. Just as Naaman needs God, just the villages and the people of Israel and beyond need Jesus and his followers and the healing and hope they bring. Just as the land needs cultivating and rain, the Gulf needs cleaning up, our children need stable households, the homeless need shelter, the hungry need food, the unemployed need work, and we need government that serves the people. Just as we need hope and healing, we need our communities and safety, and yes indeed, we need our freedom just as our founders did. . . need it as badly as the air we breathe, need it enough to boldly proclaim our right to it even against considerable odds and in the face of terrible dangers. We need it and we dare not take it for granted. We need those freedoms shepherded and taught for the next generation, and for all their foibles we need to remember the people who gave up so much – some gave up everything – that we might have the liberty we continue to try to live into, that we continue to try to honor.

And we need the grace of God to get us home to those freedoms. We are reminded of that this day as we share in a communion borne of free self-offering and sacrifice that has inspired so many before us to lay down their lives so that we might be free. As we celebrate a Savior who knew that the Gospel, like any great dream of a free people, required empowerment of others much more than hoarding power to oneself. God bless us, for our needs are great this Independence Day, and so are the needs of our continuing service and healing for the wider world.