

A Guide for Unlikely Seekers

Lake Street Church of Evanston

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This past week my parents went to Europe for the first time, which was quite exciting for me. The lead up had plenty of questions from them, about what to see in Amsterdam, what to bring, would the American appliances work? Yes but only with an adapter. Do folks in the Netherlands speak English? Yes, almost everybody will be able to communicate with you. I was giddy because they were going to get to do something they had put off for a long while, and it was something I've done plenty of. I could give them tailored advice, so tailored that it was based on their interests, their idiosyncrasies, their essential selves. Of course, none of my advice was groundbreaking – yes you should travel via canal, no don't miss the Ann Frank house, if your stomach can handle it you should try raw herring. Go see the Van Goghs for goodness sake, go see them. None of that was complicated advice – it was all simple and easy to follow. I was happy to get it, even knowing that at least a few points of it would be ignored – folks need to go their own way anyway and figure out what suits them.

And so we have two stories of advice being given, one of someone who has traveled a long way for that advice, and the other story of some 70 people who are about to set out to do a big thing, and they are getting advice from a seasoned traveler who had no stable home for many years – Jesus. In Naman's case, he thinks it's all hogwash. Why have I even come all this way when I am just being told to take a bath, but his servants step in when they see a successful man about to make a big mistake, and they say, hey, this is easy stuff, why don't you just take a bath and see what happens? Of course it works, because the person giving the advice is a prophet and a healer, and of course because they don't list stories of failure from those same folks too much in the Bible. Namaan asks for advice and like so many of us, he is immediately ready to not take the advice. In that way he is not unlike a modern reader of the text, revealing something about the human nature of asking and receiving advice. People love to give it, and we rarely like to take it wholesale.

In the case of the 70 apostles, we receive some very practical straightforward advice – go into a town, tell them peace, if they receive you, good. Stay with a family, don't hop around, eating and drinking. If they don't receive you, then get out of there and tell them what they missed out on. Solid advice, which if followed will keep the 70 out of trouble, but we are human beings full of frailty, and so we know that eventually almost everyone of them will think they know better than the dude who did it before.

But I want to draw attention to how unlikely our sets of travelers are this morning, which I guess is perhaps why the lectionary, the set of readings common to Christian churches, paired them. Namaan is unlikely to be in Israel because he is a Syrian of high station who worships other gods, who is used to commanding armies and people. In short he is used to giving the advice, not receiving it. And he almost falls into that trap of not doing the easy thing that Elisha commands. He almost doesn't take the advice, since he's an unlikely advice seeker.

Our apostles are likewise not the sorts of folks you would want to start a fledgling religious order out of. These are the B-team. I would call them has-beens, but they never were. They stopped their Jewish education probably around the age of 12, not continuing through the several ranks of education necessary for becoming the disciple of a rabbi. They had trades, they worked in the world. They knew things that rabbis do not, but they were not your typical heralds of a new religious order. They were nobodies.

And of course, we are never just one of these in our lives. In some aspects we have power and command, in others we are woefully deficient or have never even tried to be successful. There's a reason why successful business people won't play the guitar poorly in public – we don't like looking like we don't know what we're doing. As a side note that is also why I will never play the guitar for you.

But just as these folks were unlikely journeyers, unlikely people to undertake a big journey and see what's on the other side, you are probably if you're at Lake Street also not a likely journeyer. You probably have been on some of the back roads of the spiritual life, maybe you harbor doubts, maybe you are resolved that some things just aren't true, maybe you've been hurt and traumatized by the church in a way that makes it an act of bravery to show up here and hear me talk.

Well, here's the word that I think is for unlikely travelers in this passage, especially the one on the apostles. Whether people hear you, understand you, accept you, love you, or don't, Jesus is comfortable telling the apostles that God has been working through them in the moments of their complete failure as well. And so unlikely travelers, whether you are getting a lot of love for your spirituality or your activism, or that is decidedly not the case, you ought to know that the divine spark is within you, that it touches those that you reach out to in a spirit of love and forgiveness, whether they accept it or not.

And then there are trips that you just shouldn't take. Maybe you hear Jesus or Elisha's advice, something deep within you says, you know what I'm good. Maybe it's the fact that this whole story in the Bible from Namaan's point of view is made possible by

sexual slavery in the first few verses and that no one seems to be pissed about it, maybe it's the fact that the Bible is full of such moments of trauma that makes you unable to accept it. I want to tell you there are times when we ought to stay home as well – I included that quote from Abba Anthony in your bulletin for that reason. Sometimes one ought not go to Constantinople, because you will only be Anthony, but here you are brother Anthony, and there is something deep about your identity that is fed by staying home, by rejecting that advice. I affirm that to you as well, because there are times that I stay home, that I don't go all the way with scripture, because I just can't. There are some passages that take me back to being 9 years old and hearing fundamentalist sermons, and even though I have a decade now of theological education, emotionally I find it difficult to turn to those passages. That's ok too.

In Ecclesiastes, it tells us that although all streams flow to the sea, countless measures of water, they are never emptied. Thus our efforts, our contentions, our going out and our staying at home are never wasted, they are merely a part of us becoming more fully human, and folks I don't know about you, but if that's not the good news this morning, I have no clue what is.

Blessed Be.