

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

There's a lot of traveling going on in today's readings. Naaman travels to Israel. The disciples of Jesus go on road trips. Kind of like the group of nuns who were on the road when they were pulled over by a patrolman. For going too far *under* the speed limit. He said, "Sister, this is a 65 mile per hour highway. Why are you going so slowly?" She said, "I saw a lot of signs that said 22. Isn't that the speed limit?" "Oh no, Sister," he said. "That's the number of the route you're on – highway 22."

At this point the officer noticed the other nuns in the car. They were sweating and short-of-breath. One was trembling. He said, "What's wrong with your passengers? They look like they're in fear for their lives." Said the sister: "Oh, we just got off highway 99."

There's a lot of traveling going on in today's readings. In these episodes we see that God's ways of doing things differ from ours. We spend most of our lives learning the *right* way to do things. Which is good! It's what we should do. But God finds the unexpected way; the unimaginable way – like incarnating holiness as a baby born in a barn on the first Christmas. When we get into the rhythm of the spiritual life, we find it is full of the unexpected; the delightful; that which is lovely and brimming with joy!

In our first reading Naaman, a foreign general, knew how to do things right. He was, after all, a man of protocol as all generals are. But he was not a healthy man. He heard there was healing in Israel. His country, Syria, had a long history of hostility with Israel. In fact, today the two nations are technically in a state of war and have been so since Israel became a nation in 1948. There's no peace treaty; there's limited trading; and virtually no travel is permitted between the two states.

It was important for Naaman to do this thing right for the sake of diplomacy. He bought lavish gifts to prove his peaceful intent. He petitioned his king for a letter of introduction. But when the king of Israel read it, knowing that he could not heal anyone, he was terrified. This was a trap. A clever way to spark invasion and new rounds of war.

But the prophet Elisha heard of Naaman's plight; urged his king to send Naaman around to his house; then – basically – sent out the cook to give him the healing instructions. The prophet did not even greet the general. We aren't told why. Maybe Elisha wanted Naaman to know that God is the one who heals, not prophets.

But what a bruising to the ego! Naaman operated on the international stage. He was immensely wealthy, powerful and successful. And since he's doing everything right and according to protocol, he expected no less from Elisha. That's only natural. Besides, generals do not take orders from cooks.

Naaman balks at the deal and is ready to head home – angry, disillusioned, and still sick. Like so many of us at different times in life. We’re angry, disillusioned and sick. But Naaman’s friends convince him to do what he has been told to do. These particular friends are reminiscent of the ones in the New Testament who strap a sick buddy to a gurney and lower him through the roof to be where Jesus is. In that account, the man was healed. And in today’s account, so was Naaman. Friends help us heal.

For Naaman to comply with what a lowly servant said to do – the servant of a prophet from a hostile country – took amazing humility. And, by the way, what courage it took for the one strapped to that gurney to be lowered through a roof. Humility and courage help us heal.

Naaman and the man on the gurney were both on journeys of faith – just as we are. In fact, the idea of “journey” was not lost on those who built medieval cathedrals. They called the central part – where the people sit – the “nave.” We call it that, too. “Nave” comes from the Latin word meaning “ship” because cathedral builders thought that the inside looked like the bottom of a boat turned upside down.

Our journey of faith can go far out to sea or it can cruise near the shore. In the depth of the spiritual life there is no right or wrong; good or bad; better or best. As soon as we start comparing how spiritual we are one to one another, we become like the Galatians in our second reading. Paul told them they were no more spiritual or holy or right being circumcised versus uncircumcised.

But there are depths to life in the Spirit. The closer-in waters represent the surface level. And even that is deep. Naaman learned that God’s ways are not our ways – a hard lesson to learn. The shallows of spirituality teach us to put aside our own egos – that part of us that worries so much. That part of us that is mostly image. The shallows teach us, like Naaman, the value of humility in the life of faith.

But there are deeper waters as well. Spiritual masters and mystics speak of living a life in union with God. How to get there? They use the language of surrender to God or submission to God. That is the correct energy but for today, it is bad language. It’s problematic because of all the abuse we see around submission – of women to men; of children to abusive adults. To submit is often to deny one’s own autonomy. I prefer the language of partnership and friendship. A partner is one who has equal standing with the other but knows to operate in union with the other.

This is a place of deep spirituality. Partnership with God means absolute trust that isn’t resignation or fatalism. It’s a kind of trust that takes the long view. It says, “All is well,” not because everything is going my way but because something much greater than me exists that is perfect and pure and lovely. And I am part of it. This greater thing is *for* me, not *against* me. Believing that takes a largeness of spirit that requires time and patience and prayer to develop.

We can see the beginning of that journey to largeness of spirit in today's episode with Jesus. He sends out his disciples in pairs because in Judaism it took the testimony of two to establish the truth of something. So two-by-two they went. Thirty-five sets of disciples with no food, water or money. That's just not the right way to travel.

But it's like a trust fall. Have you ever done one of those? You step into the center of a circle of friends who have agreed to catch you. Then you close your eyes and fall backwards. Your friends catch you. It's used a lot in church camps and for teambuilding.

Those disciples who packed no food, water or money for their journey were learning that God would catch them. That God provides. And to understand that God provides through others. There's that partnership idea again. The ones who call God "Friend" are the ones God uses; the ones who will provide bed and board to a needy stranger.

Those disciples were also learning that not everyone is trustworthy. That's probably a lesson most of us master by the time we reach double-digits in age. Not everyone has our best interests at heart. Some people are just sour. The way of God is to let it go. Don't dwell on the misery caused by unlovely people. Jesus told his disciples to let it go: depart, take your peace back with you and shake the dust from your feet.

Partnership with God means we are co-creators with God. We are the ones who will create peace in this world, as long as we abide in God. We are the ones who will bring justice to those who are crushed by oppression, greed and misunderstanding. We will be the effective justice-makers as long as we reside in God. God has no one else to bring about a peaceable kingdom of love and loveliness except us humans.

That seamless partnership – in perfect union with God – where God can't do much without us and we can't do much without God, reminds me of yet another traveling story. It involves an ancient couple and their old, battered pickup truck. Everywhere they went – he drove; she sat on the passenger side.

On one occasion they were followed for some blocks by a patrolman. Finally, he turned on his siren and pulled them over. He said, "Sir, I've been following you for some time. I've noticed that you never look both ways before making a turn. You only look to your left. Never to your right. Why is that?"

And the old man said, "That's Mama's job."

Amen.