

September 26, 2010

Bethany United Methodist Church

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Sermon: God's Call to the Young, God's Call To Us All

Scripture lesson: 2 Kings 5:1 – 14

Key verses: Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, 'If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.'

We will get to our Scripture lesson in a couple of minutes, but I first want to thank the youth of this church, those who are or will be in Sunday school, those who attend youth group, and the Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts that we in the Ellicott City parish support. These young people do so much for our community and for the world on behalf of this entire congregation.

I especially want to thank the youth of this church with whom I had the pleasure of going on a scavenger hunt around Ellicott City 2 weeks ago. They introduced me to a lot of places in my new hometown that I did not know were here!



During the scavenger hunt and in meeting with the Boy Scout leaders a few weeks ago, I spent some time reflecting on how good it is to have young people and adults working side-by-side together, not only in the area of community service, but in discussing ideas, reflecting on the importance of helping others, and truly listening to what one generation has to say to another.

This brings us to the first Scripture lesson today: 2nd Kings 5: 1 – 14. This is an ancient Jewish text. 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings and 1<sup>st</sup> Kings are both in what Christians call the Old Testament of our Bible. They were originally one book, but when the Bible was translated into the Greek language, hundreds of years ago, the book was divided into two scrolls. 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings covers approximately 400 years of Israel's history, beginning from the 900s Before Christ. The story which we will hear takes place during the reign of Israel's King Jehoram, in the early 800s Before Christ.

Naaman being cured by God through Elisha's instructions is a miracle to be sure! But I do not believe that Naaman being cured by God is the only fantastic part of this story!

There is another fantastic part to this story, and it is a miracle that sets everything else in this story into motion!



Kings and military leaders may be powerful, and prophets challenge and encourage people of faith, and the servants mentioned in this story are influential in Naaman's decision to cleanse himself in the Jordan River, but there is one character in the story that I think is the most fascinating person in these events – it is the young girl from Israel who had been enslaved by Naaman on one of Aram's raids of Israel. She is first mentioned in verse 2 and then we don't hear about her ever again after verse 4! She is the one who said, *“If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.”*

I call this a miracle done by this girl for several reasons. When an invading army conquers a place, they often take things of value, like money or resources. In ancient Israel's time, people were kidnapped, especially children who could serve as slaves. This young girl had been taken from her parents, taken from her home, taken from her land, had been forced to learn a new language. Now, after all this, this girl could have remained silent; she could have kept her knowledge of Elisha's and God's healing power to herself...but she shared it! And I believe this generosity on her part is a miracle!

But I am forced to wonder. Why? Why did she do this? As a slave taken from her home, she had lots of reasons to hate her masters. Clearly, though, this girl had love, compassion, and a desire not to see people suffer. And her faith in God was certain – she did not say, “Maybe Naaman can be cured, or maybe Elisha can give him a second opinion about his disease.” She was certain: Elisha would cure Naaman of his leprosy. She had no doubts about it.

I wish I knew this girl's name. I wish I knew what happened to her. I even sometimes wish I had a faith like she did. We do not always have the luxury of getting to know the names, or the futures, or the faiths of the young people who possess the ability to transform our lives in similar ways to the way this young girl transformed Naaman's life. But we here in the Ellicott City Parish at Bethany United Methodist Church do have the fortune and are blessed to have the opportunity to know the names, the futures, and the faiths of the young people in our midst. And let me state with no doubt, our young people have the power to transform lives in so many positive ways, just like this young slave girl was able to do in the Scripture we just heard.

We adults have much to learn from the youth of this church and from the Scouts who meet here every week. This past week, our youth pastor Carrie Larsen and I asked some of the youth via Facebook what challenges they face in their own lives.

I learned from them about some of the struggles in their families, about how they know some people who have tried to commit suicide, about seeing friends dealing with drug addiction, about the stress of school work, and about the possible inability to afford to go to college.

I suspect young people at all times have faced difficult challenges, and I look around at some of the challenges I see that young people today face. School violence is rampant; drug abuse is considered recreational; terrorism is real; youth also face the possibility of going to war, and of being denied educational opportunities due to a lack of financial resources.

And advertising, youth are told that to be cool, they need to own products that cost a lot of money, girls are told they need to be sexy to get ahead, guys are encouraged to be tough and not to show their emotions or else they will get hurt. Young people are told they need to possess a perfect physical image, however that is defined by advertisers, but, because there is no profit in it, are never encouraged to build up their inner and spiritual strength.

In the face of these challenges, however, young people rise again and again to meet them, to push on, to struggle to find their voice, to demand to be heard. And we adults have much to learn from them.

Over the years, I've tried to encourage middle and high school students that I've met at youth conferences to go back to their churches and communities and express their disgust that people in the world still starve to death, their weariness of hearing sermons that do not include them, their anger at being objects of advertising, and to say how tired they are of dealing with the violence of bullying, school shootings, and drug addiction. I have found among most young people an awareness of things going on in the world and a desire to see things change.

With Youth Pastor Carrie Larsen's help, I asked the youth here about ways they thought the world should change. I also called youth I know from other churches as well. I share with you their answers and only their first names. Chris, Connie, and Donna shared that they are upset that people in the world starve to death. One high schooler, Gunner, said he is concerned about the state of the economy. Shawn, who recently received his Eagle Scout rank from his troop in Carroll County talked about ending poverty, and his friend Nathaniel expressed concern for homeless people. 8<sup>th</sup>-grader Jill and 11<sup>th</sup>-grader Ronny who went to The United Methodist Youth Conference in Ocean City called The Rock with me 2 years ago and Tony, another Boy Scout I know, expressed to me a desire for peace in the world and an end to hatred. For the most part,

young people do not generally blame adults for these problems. They see adults and themselves as being part of the solutions to these issues. Others raised some specific concerns I'd like to share:

Eagle Scout Dave and his friend Greg expressed the concerns about the obsession some people have with money and materialism. High school senior Jake suggested that people can resist temptation by putting more time into God. Justin, a 12<sup>th</sup>-grader I met at The Rock this year, said he would like to see youth and adults witness to the role God plays in our lives. Boy Scout Christopher and several middle and high school students I know – Morgan, Taylor, Karlyn, Sarah, and Tyler – spoke in general terms about people needing to learn to be kind to one another without judgment. Much of this concern



included a need for people to increase their own self-esteem and love for God. Zach, a boy who is home schooled, shared with me that he is concerned about gang violence. I shared with him I had been touched by gang violence.

Virginia Spevak pictured on the left volunteered her time to teaching Sunday School where I used to be a youth pastor. She and her husband were murdered by members of a gang two years ago.

ago.

Ben, Dalton, and Rahal, all Boy Scouts, shared with me about their hope that the country would decrease pollution, littering, and global warming. Their friend Eric suggested that the country begin to utilize solar energy fields! Finally, for animal lovers here like Lu Lan and me, high school Freshman Nathan expressed a desire that humans are not the only ones in the world in need of our help.

Like Naaman and his servants who learned from the little slave girl, we adults have a lot to learn from our youth and our children. Many of them understand that the true path to God's righteousness lies not in the rise to power, fame, and glory, but in service to the marginalized people of society. When we support our young people and listen to them like Naaman listened to his slave girl, we proclaim that they matter in helping to bring God's kingdom to bear in our midst.

I want to share with you some examples of ways that other young people are making a difference in the world:



The woman on the left is Elizabeth Sholtys, a 25-year-old from Ithaca, New York. In 2006, at the age of 21, while a Junior at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, she went to India, learned Hindi – the native language there – and started an orphanage for children living on the streets using money donated from her family and friends. She became known on the university campus as that crazy girl who started an orphanage in India while being a full-time student. She lives in India now overseeing the orphanage

operations when she's not back in the United States fundraising for the orphanage that is now home to 10 children. She is an amazing woman making a difference in the world. The man in the picture is Robbie Brown, who graduated from Emory University with Elizabeth in 2007. Every year at Commencement, Emory University awards \$20,000 to a graduate who shows the most promise of becoming a global leader. Robbie was awarded the \$20,000 in 2007. On the day of his graduation, much to the chagrin of his father, Robbie gave all that money to Elizabeth, a woman he had never met before, to help with the orphanage! Now, some of you might be thinking, "Martin, I'm never going to win \$20,000. I don't know Hindi, and I don't know how to start an orphanage." But there are other ways to make a difference in the world. And you don't need to be in your 20s like Elizabeth and Robbie are.

This is 16-year-old Emily Kerstetter, who attends school in Catonsville and is a



member of Christ Community United Methodist Church in Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania. Along with other members of Christ Community Methodist, Emily traveled to Uganda this past summer to do some construction work for a church and a school in that country. While eating dinner at a restaurant near the end of the mission trip in July, a terrorist bomb went off seriously injuring her, almost taking off her leg. She is back in the United States now, being treated at Johns

Hopkins hospital. Despite what happened, she does not regret the work she did in Uganda. Emily is making a difference in the world at 16, but you don't even need to be a teenager to make a difference.



This is Chance Leo. He lives in Germantown and will turn 10-years-old this November. For his 8<sup>th</sup> birthday, instead of asking for presents for his birthday, he asked for donations to Shady Grove Adventist Hospital in Gaithersburg. He raised \$350 for the pediatric unit at the hospital. He is an animal lover, but he decided to give to the hospital instead because he wanted to help other children like himself. But raising money is not the only way you can help make a difference in someone's life.

This past week, I met with the Caring Ministries Committee here at Bethany. Among many other things, one of the activities this committee does is try to encourage people to visit with our Bethany Friends at Home, people who due to their physical condition are unable to join us on Sunday morning. My friends, let me be frank with you: We are in need of people to visit our Friends at Home. Is God calling you to this opportunity to serve? Please let me or Julene Crooks or Lois Witte know!

Our Prison Ministry team is in need of others to share their work. We are in special need of a chairperson, which is not as tough a job as you think. The prison ministry team has people facilitating great activities for prisoners. But what this team needs now is someone who is willing to call the meetings to order, lead this committee through the agenda, and to offer ideas when the committee members need them. Is God laying on your heart Jesus' call to visit and minister to those in prison? If so, please let me know!

I'm not sure, but I think, like God spoke to Naaman through his slave girl, God can speak to us as well through one another and can transform our lives and the lives of those around us.

I look around the world, in our country, at our church, and I see young people making differences in all sorts of ways. Now you might be thinking, "*But Martin, not all young people are doing that. What about those young people who are in gangs or doing bad stuff?! Are young people really that special?*" It's a good question, but this is where we adults come into the equation. In the same way that God calls young people to God's work, God has called us adults to be role models for them. This is the calling to each and every one of us.

Some of you may be asking how to learn how to be a better role model to young people. To this question, I would answer this way: First, pray to God. Ask God to help

you live your life in such a way that others see that your life is touched by Jesus so much that you cannot help but show love to all people. Second, I invite you to join a small group here at Bethany. Many of our members are in a group of 8 or more people who meet every week to pray, discuss issues of faith, and learn more about how to experience God and live a Christian life together. If joining a small group is something you have been thinking about, there is no better time than to join one now. You may talk with me or with Judy Fenner, or small groups coordinator after the service. A small group can help you in the process of becoming a role model not just to young people, but to all people.

God's call to young people to transform our world is a call to all of us. We adults are transformers of the world, too, but we have to go one step further. We need to serve as positive role models for the young people.

A few years ago, I met a man who was a member of a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregation in Texas. He told me that their church had a major battle over whether or not youth should be able to join the Session, what we call our Church Council, our Focus Team. After months of debate, among only the adults I should add, the congregation decided against it. Many apparently felt that the youth were not responsible, or too immature to handle discussions of important issues. Learning about that situation saddened me. What were the messages, I wondered, that the young people received from those discussions and that decision?

We at Bethany are way ahead of that Presbyterian congregation in the inclusion of young people. This is something to celebrate, but we should ask ourselves if there is more we can do to be present for our young people. It is not simply enough to say our committees and activities are open to the youth. Specific invitations to specific youth to serve on our church committees, such as Caring, Worship, Education, and others may be things we should consider!

Finally, some of the best sermons I have ever heard have been delivered by youth. It would be exciting to hear them preach some Sunday. The youth are not just the future of the church – they are also the church today!

God is calling young people to bring heaven to bear in the midst of our world. God is calling adults to support them in their efforts! Let us remember that all of us, regardless of our age, are not just a beacon of Christ in the future, but are also that beacon of Christ today! Amen.