

Apostles on the Move
July 7, 2019 Message—Sally Cerny

Those of you who were lucky enough to hear Mary’s message to us last week probably recognized today’s *Old Testament* reading, where Naaman, Aram’s Army commander, came to Israel to be cured of leprosy. Naaman sought a cure with gold and silver and horses and chariots and the recommendation and blessings of the kings of both Aram and Israel—not to mention advice and help from his servants. Yet all these assets were no match for leprosy, even in the Old Testament.

In the story, the prophet Elisha offered the Israeli King to help, and so Naaman went in all of his regalia to the entrance of Elisha’s home. But Elisha *did not* come out to heal Naaman, hands on, the way it happened in many of Jesus’ miracles. Who wants to rush out to welcome a leper? Instead, Elisha sent out a messenger who told Naaman to wash in the Jordon River seven times, and *then* he would be healed.” Naaman was insulted and angered by Elisha’s seeming flippancy, but eventually *his own servants* convinced him to do as Elisha asked. So Naaman washed himself well seven times in the River Jordan and emerged with his skin “restored like the flesh of a young boy.” Once he overcame his pride and accepted Elisha’s wisdom, Naaman was able to *purify himself* in the river.

In today's *Epistle*, Paul also stresses the individual actions of his followers in their spiritual lives. Paul writes: *All must test their own work, then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads. Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher.* Our role is not just to have faith but also to live that faith in our lives.

Paul's Epistle to the Galatians here also adds insight to the passage from *Luke* Mary just read to us. This New Testament story appears *only* in Luke, not in any of the other Gospels. The time is just before Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem, and he, Jesus, has been received with broadly varying levels of enthusiasm and rejection up til this point.

But in this Gospel story, *Jesus* is *not* the center of action so much as *his disciples* are. Jesus appoints **70 disciples** and sends them out in pairs, much as young Mormons go on their missions today. They are to travel "to every town and place where he himself intended to go" and to offer help with the harvest and, if people asked for it, healing in exchange for food and shelter. If all goes well, they will prepare the way for Jesus.

In today's passage, Jesus details specifically what the disciples should do and *not do*—actually even more so than what you heard, because several verses on how to treat the people and places who reject them were left out. Jesus knows that he won't be with the

disciples to help them. He must have felt ambiguity much like our own in sending our children off to camp or college or even military service.

In our case, we have tried to give our children the deepest roots we can, but now will they be able to develop the strong wings they will need to succeed on their ventures? *We want them to do well*, and so we tend to buy new shoes, bake cookies, give advice they don't ask for and may not want. But Jesus wants none of these things for his disciples. We read: *Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road.* That means no knapsacks, no doggie bags, no extra clothes, no money, no shortcuts—nothing but a willingness to help bring in the harvest, to offer Peace to each house, and to proclaim that “The Kingdom of God has come near to you.” It takes abundant faith and courage on both Jesus' and his followers' parts, because they really are just traveling with “the shirt on their backs.” That's a tough journey for any parent or teacher to watch. Dirty clothes, hot, dusty feet, not even sandals—and who knows where the next meal is coming from? Like Naaman and, later, Paul's followers, all 70 disciples must *test their own work, carry their own loads*. Jesus tells them to shake off the dust from any town where they are rejected, because *whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.*

So now, in Luke's Gospel, it becomes the *disciples themselves* who are responsible for presenting the Lord's message. Theologians consider this charge as the precursor for the Great Commission later when Jesus sends out his 12 apostles to the corners of the earth to teach his message. And Jesus' original experiment worked! Luke reports that, *The seventy returned with joy, saying "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us."* Jesus replied, *See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all of the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."*

In all three readings today, the message has shifted beyond passively receiving God's grace to becoming an active part in what unfolds. It moves beyond *obedience* to *involvement*. Jesus does not keep all power in his own hands and healing is no longer solely through his personal touch. Jesus instructs, enables, and empowers his followers to walk and teach and even heal in his ways. So the power *is* in Jesus, but it also is in us. Philosophers theorize that it is this *active role*, of going beyond obedience to your priest or king to responsible independent action, that strengthened Christian faith and, over time, led to the reformation and modern political and economic systems. Faith is critical, belief in God is critical, but so are our own actions.

As it turned out and as you know, Christianity did not die with Jesus on the Cross, and it was not limited even to the lessons of the Resurrection. Picture the 70 disciples of Luke's Gospel as barefoot migrant workers traveling in faith, spreading God's word. If this makes you smile or wonder, maybe it will also help a bit with some struggle or challenge you are facing. Then, as now, the Lord works in mysterious ways.