

SERMON TITLE: "A Little Child Shall Lead Them: A Girl Who Offered God's Help"
SERMON TEXT: 2 Kings 5:1-15a
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: September 13, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, our Mountain Sky Conference bishop, Karen Oliveto, published a book. In the introduction of that book, Bishop Karen wrote about her formative childhood experience in Long Island, New York, at the Babylon United Methodist Church. That church valued ministries to children and youth, and Karen found herself very much at home in Sunday School classrooms with flannel board Bible story figures. As a fourth grader, she began participating in the Wesley Choir, where not only was her singing affirmed but also her attempts at playing the guitar.

One day, her choir director and minister, Rev. Ken White, asked 11-year old Karen what she wanted to do when she grew up. Karen had had a fascination with the stars, so she told him she was considering astronomy. But when Rev. White asked young Karen if she had ever considered becoming a minister, it was like a shot of electricity flowed through her body. At that time in her life, Karen had never seen a woman minister before, but "from that moment on," she knew "what God had created [her] to do."¹ During the rest of her childhood and throughout her teenage years, Karen's sense of call to serve God and the church through ordained ministry was affirmed over and over again. That confidence in God's calling later sent Karen to study at seminary, become ordained, serve local church ministries, and eventually lead our denomination as a United Methodist bishop.

During this month of September, we're focusing our attention on the words of Isaiah 11:6, that—in God's ideal kingdom—"a little child shall lead them." Last Sunday, we began to fill in that idea with the story of young Samuel. Born as a child of promise, Samuel was "a boy who heard God's voice." Today, we move on to Second Kings, chapter five. Let's see what leadership lessons we can learn from this story of "a girl who offered God's help."

1—TO CARE ABOUT OTHERS

In this account of the girl who helped Naaman find healing, we see first of all that she is leading us to care about others. This girl, whose name isn't even provided to us, is the catalyst of this whole story. Army commander Naaman, the king of Aram, the king of Israel, and even Prophet Elisha all have a role to play in this narrative. But none of those powerful men nor even Naaman's wife, who would have had some power of her own, were the ones who got this ball rolling. This story of healing would never have happened if it weren't for this anonymous girl who took notice of Naaman's suffering.

In spite of her lowly status as a captive servant and slave, in spite of the tragedy of her kidnapping and abduction from her native land and people, in spite of the trauma of separation from her parents and siblings, in spite of the fact that her freedom and dignity had been stolen from her—this slave girl from Israel somehow had the capacity to care about the man who owned her life. We don't know if Naaman was a benevolent master or if he treated the girl with contempt and violence. Neither do we know how the girl was treated by Naaman's wife. But what we do know is that this young girl showed compassion and interest in Naaman's pain and suffering. In spite of her own troubled circumstances, she was able to look beyond herself and care for others.

Does that mean all persons of lowly status should quietly and humbly accept their situation and eagerly serve their oppressors? No, not necessarily. In some cases, when an opportunity arises, the servants of our society might do well to rise up in rebellion, to escape, or—at the very least—demand some decent compensation for their essential labor. But this girl's ability to demonstrate compassion, even under adverse circumstances, certainly does point out how much more we could do. If this girl, from her lowly estate, was able to offer God's healing help, then certainly we—from our positions of blessing and privilege—can use our mask-wearing example, our handyman or casserole skills, our phone calls, our letters and cards, our social and political influence, and our financial resources to point others in the direction of God's healing love. This girl who offered God's help leads us to care about others.

2—TO BELIEVE IN GOD’S HEALING POWER

A second way this girl showed leadership was to believe in God’s healing power. Because of the huge differential between this slave girl and the army commander, there was a lot at stake for her in speaking up. The girl probably wouldn’t have taken the risk to tell her mistress and master about the prophet of God in Israel if she weren’t confident that God’s mighty power could heal Naaman’s leprosy. This young girl is a leader for us because she shows us, that even when her life was hard, even when her life wasn’t going the way she would have wanted, even when she had been taken away from her homeland and the ability to worship God in Israel with her fellow Israelites, she could still believe in God’s healing power.

This past week, I learned about an inspirational song that was based on a poem that has appeared with slightly different words and backstories over the years, as the poem was used in sermons and publications. But the general idea is that the poem was originally written by a Jewish prisoner on the wall of a cellar in a Nazi concentration camp. In one form, the inspirational words go like this:

I believe in the sun even when it is not shining.
I believe in love, even when it is not apparent.
I believe in God, even when he is silent.²

“I believe . . . even when.” It’s good to believe in God’s healing power when our lives are going well. But it’s more important to believe in God’s healing power even when times are hard: when the coronavirus is raging, when fires are burning up our country, when the electricity is off for days, when the food in our freezers is ruined, when unemployment is high, when our bodies and our emotions are sick, and when we don’t know how to pay the bills. Earlier in this service, we sang a hymn which reminds us that “God our help in ages past” can be “our hope for years to come.” If we remember these Bible and hymn stories, these faith stories of our people, we can find ways to hold on to hope. Even when bad things happen, we can follow the slave girl’s leadership to believe in God’s healing power.

3—TO REIMAGINE OUR RELATIONSHIPS

So, the young girl in this story is a leader to us because she inspires us to care about others and to believe in God's healing power. I would dare to suggest a third reason that she is a leader. She is leading us to reimagine our relationships.

Think about this story. The girl reimagines her relationship with her mistress and master. Instead of being only a slave-laboring lowly foreigner who is seen but not heard, by using her voice, the girl becomes, at least for a short time, a trusted, valued, and resourceful advisor. Likewise, Naaman has to reimagine his relationship with Israel. In his protests against dipping himself in the Jordan River, it's pretty obvious that he considered Israel to be an undesirable country. It wasn't quite so bad to deal with the king of Israel and maybe the prophet of Israel. But to be told by a servant to go dip in the Jordan River seemed far beneath his dignity. Fortunately, Naaman had his own servants with him who helped him to reimagine his relationship with the land, the people, and the God of Israel.

This reimagining of relationships with people who are different from us makes me think of an email I received last Sunday afternoon. Many of you know Esther, who has been a faithful member of our congregation for a long time. Last year, Esther moved to Florida to live with and near her sons. This is what Esther wrote to me:

In these days of riots and racial stress, I wanted to share with you my experience here in Orlando with the various ethnicities I have encountered. Some of them are these:

- My primary care physician, Dr. Desai, was born and educated in India.
- My cardiologist, Dr. LeFran, is from a Latin American country.
- My urologist is Dr. Han; she is Chinese.
- My dermatologist is Dr. Jain from India.
- My dental hygienist is African American.
- Most of my physician assistants and nurse practitioners are either Latino or African American.
- My daughter-in-law is from Brazil, and her parents were from Portugal.
- My birthday cake was made by her sister, also from Brazil, and who is married to an Italian American.

When Esther moved from Ogden to Orlando, her relationships changed in more ways than she probably could have imagined. And she loves “finding all that [she] could hope for” in that variety of “extremely-competent,” “well-loved,” and “well-respected people.”

While we may not have that much variety in the population around us here in Utah, we certainly can follow Esther’s lead of reimagining our relationships with people who are different from us. This season of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter protests isn’t a time when we should allow ourselves to become more afraid of the “other.” It isn’t a time to build barriers. No, we don’t all need to run out and buy more guns to protect ourselves from the mobs. As Esther wrote, in this time of racial unrest, it’s far better for us to think instead about the beauty, intelligence, competencies, and help that God offers to us through these people of various colors and ethnicities. Let’s follow the lead of the girl in our Bible story to reimagine our relationships.

CONCLUSION

A little child shall lead them. In today’s story from Second Kings, that child was a slave girl from Israel. I wonder who that child is today? And which child will it be in the future? I don’t know if any children or youth are listening to this sermon, but, if you are, maybe you are the next child that God is calling to become a leader of the people. Or, if you are a parent or grandparent, aunt or uncle, teacher or neighbor—maybe there’s a child in your life who could teach you a thing or two. Or maybe you can invest your love, time, and resources into that child to help her or him become a leader of people. In every age and place, we need leaders to remind us to care for others, to believe in God’s healing power, and to reimagine our relationships. As a leader, a follower, or a developer of leaders, let’s all do our part, so there will always be another boy or girl who is able to offer God’s help.

¹*Together at the Table: Diversity without Division in The United Methodist Church* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY), p. 6.

²The possible origins of this poem are complicated. One very thorough discussion can be found at <https://humanistseminarian.com/2017/03/19/i-believe-in-the-sun-part-i-look-away/>. Be sure to follow the links to read all four posts.