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Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, January 30, 2022

“The Great Invitation of Prophetic Ministry” (Luke 4) Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

To whom is God calling us? Where are the human needs to which God desires us to attend? Remember the prayer of St. Teresa--Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours? Where does God want our feet to take us?

Today's Gospel gives us a clue, but first let's ask: Are we to look primarily in our back yard? Do we seek to do ministry among those who look like us, talk like us, who share our own concerns? With whom we see eye to eye on cultural, social, and political issues? Those who make easy conversation partners, with lots of nodding and agreement and happy reinforcing of each other's perspectives?

Or, taking our cue from today's reading, does our discipleship call us into foreign territory? To people in life situations we never could have imagined? To use Jesus' own examples, people such a widow whose sustenance was reduced to a handful of meal in a jar and a few drops of oil in a little jug? Whose despair was so complete that she gathered sticks to make a fire beside which she and her son would die? Or an army general afflicted by a terrifying socially stigmatic skin disease who were nonetheless so prideful that a simple command to wash in the Jordan River and be cleansed was met with snarling arrogance--"surely such an important person as I deserve a more complex healing ritual than *that?*"

Jesus makes the point today that it is indeed these to whom God calls his prophets. Both the widow and the general were strangers, foreigners, in the eyes the people of Israel -- the widow of Zarephath, a desperately poor Phoenician woman to whom God sent the Elijah after the prophet himself had exhausted his last meal option; and Naaman, the fearsome Syrian general in 2 Kings 5, healed by the prophet Elisha, but only after he initially rejected the simple cure.

Remember the context for Jesus' first sermon: He is in his hometown, preaching his to his home congregation, proclaiming that he is the fulfillment of their scriptures.

What is he NOT telling them? "Friends, I survived the temptations by the devil, and now I have come home for your benefit. I will be spending the rest of my days among you. Come to me, you residents of Nazareth, my friends and family, and I will make you well."

What IS he saying, then? The opposite. By invoking the widow and Naaman, Jesus makes clear that God's healing is not only for all people but *especially* for strangers and foreigners. This already riles everyone, but Jesus then goes on to say although there was great need among the people of Israel at the time of Elijah and Elisha, God sent those prophets ONLY to foreigners. No wonder the congregation becomes enraged and tries to drive Jesus off a cliff. He has exposed their hypocrisy: They had assumed that because they were God's chosen people, God worked exclusively for them.

So what's in this for us? How can we embrace this invitation to attend to strangers and foreigners? Grace has a long history of strong, faithful acts of community service. But this reading brings us

face to face with a new challenge. Within reasonable driving distance, how can we take our ministry to strangers and foreigners--meaning, those who are LEAST like us?

Let's think again from the opposite perspective. Who is most like us? What do we all share in common? We all have warm clothes. We all have enough to eat. We all have jobs, or had them, so that we enjoy some kind of regular income that allows us to get from one month to the next. We all have adequate health insurance and, for the most part, decent prescription drug coverage. We all have cars or at least know someone who can give us rides. We all have wallets with a driver's license or official ID and some amount of cash. We all have birth certificates. We all have home addresses. We all have homes.

Who does not have these things? The home-less. What is life like with no home? With no income? No car, no warm clothing, no health insurance? No driver's license, no state ID, no wallet, no cash, no birth certificate? It is impossible for us to imagine. Yet there are several thousand in the Philly metro area who lack exactly these things. Imagine the entire population of Souderton unsheltered and you start to get the picture. These are the true strangers, these are the foreigners among us. How do they even manage to get one day to the next? Those who live in tents, in boxes, under bridges--how did they get through yesterday's storm? Without Elijah, the widow and her son would have died. Without us, who knows who might be at risk of perishing?

To cross into this foreign territory we must get past the misconception that homelessness is caused by drug abuse or mental health issues. On the contrary, as an excellent article in Monday's Lansdale Reporter reminded us, most often it's the result of job loss or the inability to pay for health care. Eviction follows and then the street is not far away. Once a person is homeless, everything becomes monumentally challenging. The Reporter article quotes Access Services Director Mark Boorse saying, "It's hard to maintain a job when you're homeless. Can you show up on time? Can you show up clean?" Not to mention, I would add, how hard it is to even get an interview if your job application doesn't list a permanent address.

The desperate lack of affordable housing also keeps people on the street. Rents are skyrocketing because of greedy landlords who are taking advantage of the market. Nationwide, median rents increased nearly 18% last year, more than eight times the average in preceding years. Nonprofits like Sanctuary Village are working hard to address this crisis. What can we do? How can we cross into this foreign territory? What forms would our ministry take?

I don't have any answers, but I do think today's Gospel is calling us to think more deeply about who we might serve and how. Creative plans are afoot--the Sanctuary Village board has an idea percolating for how churches can join together not only to sponsor the cost of a tiny house for those previously unsheltered, but to cultivate ongoing relationships with the new residents. New community, new hope, new life.

Imagine if Jesus, fresh from his desert temptation, HAD decided to settle down in Nazareth. He would never have met the Gerasene Demoniac and witnessed a herd of demon-possessed pigs throw themselves into a lake. He never would have met the Syrophenician woman and experienced her startling confession of her faith. What adventures of discovery await us?

Amen.