

# *He's Got the Whole World in His Hands*

## **I Timothy 2:1-7**

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Do you remember the sermon I preached back on July 3<sup>rd</sup>? Isn't that a dangerous question for a pastor to ask? If you don't remember, I don't hold it against you. I often have trouble remembering the sermon I preached last week, and I'm the one who preached the sermon! So I know it is dangerous asking if you remember the sermon I preached more than two months ago, way back on July 3<sup>rd</sup>. We had a wonderful meeting last Monday planning for the Christmas Bazaar that we will hold here at Dunn's Corners on Saturday, November 19<sup>th</sup>, and I discovered we have a group working on the Bazaar whose whole focus is re-gifting. I liked the idea so much I suggested I would be willing to re-gift some of my sermons. I was quickly put in my place when someone asked, "Do you think anyone would remember?" Yes, I know it is dangerous to ask if you remember the sermon I preached, especially when it was two months ago, way back on July 3<sup>rd</sup>.

The sermon text came from II Kings 5, and it was during the time in Israel's history when the prophet Elisha was serving the Lord with great power. Aram was a neighboring country, often in conflict with Israel. In this story the ruling military commander of Aram, a man named Naaman, came to Israel and to the prophet Elisha seeking healing for a disease from which he was suffering. The disease was leprosy. I tried to have some fun with that sermon, using the line, "I know a guy..."

Even though I tried to have some fun with that sermon, my heart was troubled in preparation. Naaman is mentioned by Jesus in the New Testament. Naaman is a ruler in the Aramean army. But when Jesus refers to Naaman, he doesn't refer to him as an Aramean. There is another name that also refers to Aram. So in Luke 4:27 Jesus calls this man beset with leprosy, "Naaman the Syrian." Here I was preparing a sermon to preach in Westerly, Rhode Island, in the summer of 2016, and Jesus is calling my attention to Syria. Refugees are fleeing Syria and bombs are exploding in Syria and ISIS is active in Syria, and the ruler of Syria seems to have a blatant disregard for the sanctity of life and around that time a picture of a little boy from Syria sitting on a chair with his face covered in blood becomes a symbol for all that wrong in Syria. Do you remember the sermon I preached on July 3<sup>rd</sup>? I do. Every time I think of the God whose love is for this whole world, I think of Syria and so many other places that are engulfed in suffering and sadness, victims of war and oppression, terrorism and poverty, disease and famine.

When Jesus makes reference to Naaman the Syrian in Luke 4 he is actually making a very controversial point. Early in his public ministry in the gospel of Luke, Jesus comes to the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, “where he had been brought up. On the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, ‘Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.’” (Luke 4:16-21)

In response to that reading of scripture and to his announcement that the reading had been fulfilled in the hearing of those present, we are told, “Everyone spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. They even asked, “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” You can imagine there was a bit of pride, some home town honor, even boasting. Local boy makes good. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” And that is when Jesus talks about Naaman the Syrian. The people in Nazareth, and the people in Galilee, are very happy to have Jesus back home, maybe expecting they will reap the benefits of him being a local boy, that they will receive some special favors. But Jesus makes some comments that basically say I will show no favoritism to my hometown. He says weren’t there many lepers in Israel, weren’t there many people with leprosy at the time of Elisha the prophet, at the time of the story we looked at here in this sanctuary just two months ago about Elisha and Naaman, weren’t there many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.

When Jesus makes that reference to Naaman the Syrian the people listening become furious and take him to the edge of town, marching him up a hill with plans to throw him off the cliff. Why? Because he was telling them that God was the God of all people, and that as God’s chosen one, as the Messiah, he had come for all people...not just his hometown people. Just like God poured his healing power out on Naaman the Syrian, Jesus had come to bring blessing to all people.

Isn’t it interesting how the people respond to Jesus in Luke 4, the people from Nazareth, the people from his hometown? He came to their synagogue. He stood in their pulpit. He read to them scriptures full of the greatest blessings, good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, the oppressed being set free, and this reference to the year of the Lord’s favor, which many believe is a direct reference to the Year of Jubilee described in Leviticus 25. When it was done and he had rolled up the scroll and sat back down, he said it has all been fulfilled right here in your hearing. The blessings, every single one of them,

were for the people in his hometown. Today this scripture has been fulfilled. And they praised him. But when he said it is for you, but not only for you...that is when tempers flared and trouble brewed.

So I do remember the sermon I preached two months ago in this sanctuary, because Naaman was a Syrian and Jesus won't let us settle for a good news that is only local, that is only for one small town, or one church, or one group of people. When the gospel of Luke ends the book of Acts begins and there is Jesus, once crucified but now risen from the dead, and he is telling his disciples that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes and that they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

This morning our readings in the Revised Common Lectionary bring us to a passage in I Timothy where Paul is instructing his young protégé Timothy to pray. But what Paul offers to Timothy is so much more than instructions in prayer. He offers him a dose of theology filled with God's gracious intention to bring salvation to all people. In his instructions about prayer we learn that God, our Savior, wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. Paul reminds us that there is only one God, and that between this one God and the humans God has created there is one mediator. That one mediator is Jesus Christ. In his role as mediator, mediating the grace and love of God to the children God created, Jesus gave himself as a ransom. Ransom is one of the metaphors the bible uses to describe how God has overcome the separation that exists between God and humans, the gulf created by the sin and brokenness of humanity. Christ Jesus gave himself as a ransom, and that ransom was given for all people. It is for the purpose of sharing this good news of God's salvation for all people that Paul has been appointed a herald and an apostle.

Paul is instructing Timothy, his true child in the faith, to pray for God's salvation to come to all people. This is not a small prayer. This is not a provincial prayer. This is not a partisan prayer. This is not just for one small hometown or one individual synagogue or church. This is not a prayer for one political party or for one nation. When the people of God pray, they pray for all people.

The prayer for all people is grounded in the belief that Jesus Christ gave his life as a ransom for all people. Right in the text before us is evidence of how wide and broad and deep and high is the love of God for all people. Paul writes about himself in verse 7 that he has been appointed as herald and an apostle and a true and faithful teacher of the Gentiles. When God elected the people of Israel to be his chosen people, they were blessed with the covenant of circumcision and the gift of the law; they were the ones he delivered from slavery and the ones who received the Promised Land. But the father of faith for Israel was Abraham, and it was to Abraham that God said in Genesis 12:3, "All people on earth will be blessed

through you.” Israel was blessed so that they might be a blessing to all people. For many years there was a wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles. That hostility is witnessed to in the Book of Acts when Peter, a Jew, is roundly criticized for entering the home of Cornelius, a Gentile. And yet it was in the very home of Cornelius, a Gentile, that Peter witnessed the Holy Spirit filling the lives of the Gentiles. Those Gentiles were baptized as they believed in Jesus Christ. Christ Jesus gave his life as a ransom for all people. The gospel crosses racial and national and cultural bounds, because God is the God of all people. It was to reach the Gentiles with the good news of this salvation that Paul was appointed an apostle and a herald and a true and faithful teacher. So our passage begins today with Paul writing to Timothy, his young protégé, “I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people.”

We make prayers for all people because we can't even comprehend the reach of God's love. Paul is writing these words to Timothy. Before these words about praying for all people, Paul has made a confession about himself. “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy...The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly...” (I Timothy 1:12-14) He even labels himself the worst of sinners. Yes, in his letters and in the book of Acts we have the story of Saul, the enemy of Christians, the enemy of Christ, pursuing Christians for the purpose of persecuting them and even putting them to death. It was that Saul who met the risen Christ and whose life was transformed. The one who persecuted the church became the servant of the Lord. We pray for all people because the ones who seem furthest away from God, the ones who seem most adamantly and vehemently opposed to God, the ones who are enemies of God, might be the ones who turn to God.

In a time of great turmoil in our nation, in a time of incredible violence and attacks by terrorists and wars on many fronts, may we be reminded that the God we serve has a very interesting way of calling our attention to Syria when all we are trying to do is come up with a sermon for Sunday? He has a habit of putting the need to welcome the stranger, the alien, the foreigner, all throughout this book we call the bible. He doesn't shy away from telling us that not only are we to love our neighbor we are also called to love our enemy. Why? Because God created this whole world. God blessed this whole world and said it was good. When God chose Abraham and promised to form the nation Israel his purpose was that through Abraham and Israel all people would be blessed. It is because God so loved the world, the whole world, that he sent his only begotten Son. Christ Jesus gave himself as a ransom for all people. When Jesus sent his disciples they were sent to make disciples of all the nations. He sent them to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. And so it is that we are called once again this morning by our God, the

blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, we are called by our God to offer petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving for all people. He's got the whole world in his hands, and his hands bear the marks of the ransom he paid for this whole wide world.

In the spring of 2001 I met a young man from the other side of the world. At that time my mind was focused on my small world, being a pastor of a church in Houston, Texas, being a husband and a father to four young children. I had several other commitments that kept me focused on my world and my concerns. And into my life walked a young man from Africa, from Sudan, whose name was Samuel. Samuel was part of the Lost Boys of Sudan, that courageous group of refugees from Sudan who fled the civil war as children, and crossed deserts, crossed swamps filled with alligators, crossed wilds where lions prowled, all the while eating only roots from the ground. Somehow these Lost Boys became found and eventually were resettled in the United States. Samuel Biar came to the United States as a refugee, fleeing the war in his country.

One Sunday morning Samuel Biar, a refugee from Sudan, from Africa, a tall, skinny young black man, walked into our church and when he saw me he smiled warmly, walked up to me, hugged me, and called me "Bubba." Now I don't tell many people this, but way back when I was a youth pastor in California, my youth group called me Bubba. When I got to Texas and saw what the real Bubbas were like, I dropped that nickname in a flash. But here was Samuel, a young man from Sudan in Africa, and he knew my nickname. I was pretty proud that my nickname Bubba was known halfway around the world. Then Julie jabbed me in the side and said, "He called you Baba." Baba is word the Sudanese use for father. With a big smile Samuel hugged me and said, "You will be my father." He knew I was a pastor and so he called believed I would be a father.

Samuel has blessed my life now for more than 15 years. He showed incredible courage and commitment to his family when he went back to war torn Sudan to visit his mother because she was sick. "What could I do, she is my mother." He has worked hard to stand on his own. As a refugee he came with literally nothing and now he supports himself and pays his taxes. He went back to Africa and brought home a wife and together they have three little boys. In all of it he has displayed an incredible faith in God, trusting in God's goodness, and claiming the gift of salvation that comes through Jesus Christ.

A few months ago I received a phone call. I was in the parking lot of Stop & Shop here in Westerly, Rhode Island. It was Samuel. He told me some incredible news. This Lost Boy who had to run for his life across jungles and rivers and lived off roots and nuts for so many years, has found a home. He has literally found a home. Samuel and his wife Rhoda and their three boys have bought a home. It

was just about the sweetest thing I have ever heard. He said, “You helped me get this home and I wanted to tell you the good news.” I helped him? No, it was the other way around. Samuel helped me. He called me Baba. He invited me into his life every step of the way.

Samuel bought his home in Kingwood, a suburb of Houston. Houston is a very diverse city, made up of many racial and ethnic communities. But Kingwood as a city is 90% Anglo, 90% white. Some street in Kingwood, Texas, a city that is 90% Anglo, 90% white, has a new family who have moved in. They have new neighbors, and these new neighbors are not white. Now that could be a recipe for disaster. That could be a perfect opportunity for the lingering seeds of racism or bigotry to rear their ugly head. Or it could be the perfect opportunity for someone who has been offering petitions, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving for all people to see Samuel, his wife Rhoda, their three young boys, and say, “Welcome. Welcome.” As divided as our nation and world are right now, it is the ideal time, even an urgent time, for the people of God to remember God’s love is for the whole world...for Syria...for Sudan...for Samuel and his family in Kingwood, Texas...for a church in the South County of Rhode Island...it is the perfect time, the ideal time, an urgent time for us to offer petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving for all people. He’s got the whole world in his hands, and his hands bear the marks of the ransom he paid for this whole wide world.