

29 November 2015

**Courageous Compassion**  
2 Kings 6:15-23

As a rule, there are few things I could do up here on Sunday that would do so little good and potentially do so much harm as speaking on current political issues. It would be unhelpful because current news usually consists of trivial issues pumped up to get people fired up for a week or two, which are then promptly forgotten. Remember Kim Davis? In the church, we proclaim Jesus Christ – who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. To put it another way, when we let CNN direct our thoughts, our thoughts tend to be shallow. But politics in sermons is more than just unhelpful; it's dangerous. Today's political environment is so polarized that it no longer seems possible to discuss politics anywhere with civility. "Political" discourse today tends to be sneering and angry, and moves quickly to personal attacks. Why would I introduce that sort of rancor into the Body of Christ? With that in mind, and knowing that this congregation includes a *wide* range of political opinions, I try to avoid commenting on current events. I don't always succeed. My own politics are left of center, and that does occasionally come out in sermons. And yes, I've gotten concerned letters when I've betrayed my liberal tendencies. And yes, we have lost members. For that reason, too, I try to steer clear of politics.

But these are not normal times, are they? I, at least, have never experienced a time so hyper-charged with over-the-top rhetoric, suspicion, and outright hatred. Yes, political discourse has been degenerating for some time, but the level of invective has been ratcheted up ever since the Syrian refugee crisis hit critical mass a few months ago. Then the terrorist attacks in Paris doubled it. The internet has become dangerous to approach. Even Facebook – which just last year was a forum for middle-aged people to post cat pictures and syrupy happy thoughts – has become a platform for spreading rumors that no one bothers to fact-check and for yelling at other people's opinions. And even this I would gladly say nothing about except that now Christ has been dragged into the arena. The issue is whether to welcome Syrian refugees. Some say that we must protect our "Christian" nation from enemies and turn Syrians away, while others say we must "welcome the stranger" as Christ commanded. Both sides claim the name of Christ, but neither side presents its case with a great deal of charity toward the other.

So today I want to do this thing that I try never to do: think about politics – about the challenges of being both a citizen and a follower of Christ. Our reading today comes from 2 Kings, a story about the prophet Elisha. During Elisha's time, the nation of Israel was at war with the neighboring nation of Aram, which some Bibles translate by its modern name, Syria. In this conflict, the prophet Elisha had helped the king of Israel several times, using his prophetic inside information – "Don't send the army that way; the Syrians are waiting for you" – that sort of thing. This frustrated the king of Syria so much that he sent an army to eliminate Elisha. We pick up the story in 2 Kings 6, verses 15-23.

*When an attendant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. His servant said, 'Alas, master! What shall we do?' He replied, 'Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them.' Then Elisha prayed: 'O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see.' So the LORD opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw; the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all*

*around Elisha. When the Syrians came down against him, Elisha prayed to the LORD, and said, 'Strike this people, please, with blindness.' So he struck them with blindness as Elisha had asked. Elisha said to them, 'This is not the way, and this is not the city; follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom you seek.' And he led them to Samaria.*

*As soon as they entered Samaria, Elisha said, 'O LORD, open the eyes of these men so that they may see.' The LORD opened their eyes, and they saw that they were inside Samaria. When the king of Israel saw them he said to Elisha, 'Father, shall I kill them? Shall I kill them?' He answered, 'No! Did you capture with your sword and your bow those whom you want to kill? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink; and let them go to their master.' So he prepared for them a great feast; after they ate and drank, he sent them on their way, and they went to their master. And the Syrians no longer came raiding into the land of Israel.*

So, the Syrian armies surround the city where Elisha lives. I imagine everyone in the city is frightened, but we know for sure that Elisha's servant is terrified: "Alas, master! What shall we do?" Elisha sighs and prays that God will open the servant's eyes – upon which he sees a vision of the hosts of heaven protecting them. Elisha then prays an opposite prayer, that the Syrians would *lose* their sight, and he goes out to the suddenly blind army. "Come with me," he says, leading them literally by their hands. "I'll take you to the man you're looking for." He walks them down the road to Samaria, the capital city of Israel, where he delivers the Syrian army into the hands of the Israelite army. The king of Israel asks what he should do with his prisoners-of-war: "Should I kill them? Should I kill them?" But Elisha says, "No! You didn't capture these people with the sword. God brought them to you. They're your guests: feed them and send them home." So he does.

There are a couple of things to note in this story. The first is the relationship between blindness and fear. Elisha's servant is terrified when he looks at the Syrian army – until Elisha opens his eyes and shows him the reality of God's protection. His fear comes from ignorance and lack of faith. He's focused on the immediate, physical circumstances – which are, in fact, scary. But because all he sees is the immediate crisis, he's not able to perceive God at work.

But second, I want to think for a moment about the other interchange in this story – between Elisha and the king of Israel. The king, having received an enemy army delivered into his hands without a fight, asks if he should execute them. That sounds a little brutal, but think about it. What is the primary task of a king? It is to protect his people from enemies. Israel's been at war with Syria off and on for generations by this time. This is the army that had been killing Israelites as long as anyone could remember. These were not people suspected of being enemies, or who might have some enemies concealed among them: these *were* the enemies of Israel. The king is asking, "Now that we have them, shouldn't we kill them before they kill any more of us?" From the king's perspective, the only safe thing to do is to kill them all while he has a chance. And I'm going to bet that the Israelite people were already on board with the king's suggestion. I doubt there was anyone there who hadn't been bereaved by this hated army. To their way of thinking, I imagine, the only good Syrian would be a dead Syrian. But even though you could argue that the king's suggestion is both the practical and the popular choice, Elisha says no. He represents a different order of priorities, and he says – "They're hungry guests. Feed them."

So let's think about this and apply it to our own context. What we have in this story is a direct conflict between the duty of the king – to keep his people safe at all costs – and a radically different idea suggested by a prophet speaking for God. Elisha suggests mercy and compassion and treating the Syrians with respect and dignity. The decision is between being safe and being compassionate. *These are both valid perspectives.* I imagine the king saying, “And what if they turn around tomorrow and attack us? How will we feel then?” And he'd be right. They could. But then I imagine Elisha replying, “If we are only compassionate when it's safe, then it isn't really compassion, is it?”

That's where we are today: safety and compassion. On the one hand, we are told in Romans and 1 Peter to be good citizens of whatever nation we're a part of, because governments are ordained by God to keep order. Keeping us safe is the government's job, and we are to support them in this. But we are also told in Philippians that, as Christians, our true citizenship is in heaven, and so even as we support our government, we also represent a higher standard. Christ explains that higher standard as forgiving our enemies, praying for those who persecute us, giving when we will get nothing in return, and turning the other cheek when we are attacked. There is no way for the principles of safety and compassion to co-exist easily. Sometimes they *will* come into conflict. Sometimes we will stand with the actions of our government and be grateful for the safety it gives us, and sometimes we will stand against them and try to demonstrate a higher standard.

In our story, the king listened to Elisha. They served the Syrians a great feast then let them go, and our reading ends with verse 20: *And the Syrians no longer came raiding into the land of Israel.* That sounds great, right? They showed compassion and ended the cycle of violence, bringing peace to the land! But in fairness, I should probably read 2 Kings 6:21, the *very next verse: Some time later King Ben-hadad of Syria mustered his entire army; he marched against Samaria and laid siege to it.* We are not promised that loving our enemies will always work out for us. We have no guarantee that being compassionate and forgiving will keep us safe. That's why it's hard. That's why it takes courage – way more courage than dropping bombs and building walls. As we face a worldwide refugee crisis, trying to balance our safety with the higher standards of Christ, I for one believe it is time for us to demonstrate Christ's kind of courage: courageous compassion.

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I believe everything I just said, but for all that, most of it's beside the point. Explaining the Bible is not going to change anyone's mind. The reason public discourse has been so frantic and shrill the past few weeks is not because people just hadn't thought things through. We've become frantic and shrill because people are afraid. Now fear is a strange thing. Very often, the thing we're really afraid of has nothing to do with whatever issue we're fighting about. I've told before the story of the woman I visited in Intensive Care who barely let me in the room before she launched into an angry diatribe against Muslims, calling for a new crusade to wipe them all out. It wasn't until days later – with someone's help – that I realized, “Oh, she wasn't scared of Muslims. She was scared because she was in ICU. The Muslim thing was just how it came out.” I suspect the same is true in America. I don't know exactly what so many of us are really afraid

of, but I'm pretty sure it's not a Syrian refugee family with a preschooler – like the one that the governor of Indiana turned away last week. No, whatever our fear is, it's deeper than that. And it's not going to go away. Sadly, fear is a powerful motivator for both voters and cable news viewers, and so we have a lot of people doing everything they can to feed our fear.

We cannot overcome fear. It can't be done. The only hope is to replace it. In the New Testament reading from 1 John, we heard these words: *Perfect love casts out fear*. We gather here, within these walls, not to hide from the frightening world outside, but because here we encounter the love of Christ through the love of Christ's community. When love fills us, there is no room for fear. Fear scorches and scars the soul, but in Christ we find healing balm.