

Veggie Tales

2nd Kings 5:1-14; Galatians 6:1-10

CWZepp, BWCOB, July 7, 2019

First things first – a confession. I don't get to preach more than one Sunday at a time very often. So when I do, it's really tempting to do a series. And after the fruit of the Spirit last week, I just couldn't resist preaching on "Fruits and Veggies" my two Sundays. It's a bit gratuitous, but I hope not to our detriment.

Now, a question to be thinking about as we move forward today – which character in the story of Naaman best served the collective interests of both their own people and the common good? Hold on to that thought as you listen to the story again, told in a slightly different idiom...

Once upon a time, there was a potato. But not just any potato, this potato was the grand-daddy of all potatoes. Well, at least all prize winning potatoes at the Shenandoah County Fair lately. We'll call this potato "Payman." In recent years, Mr. Payman the Potato was the cash cow (so to speak) of Sharam Farms. For ten years running, the Payman potato lineage had produced the grand-prize winning potato at not only the Shenandoah County Fair, but also the Virginia State Fair. As you can imagine – the Master Gardener of Sharam Farms was quite pleased with Payman, and took very good care of his prime potato.

But Payman wasn't happy. He had caught the blight. It was terrible, but Payman produced such good results with his offspring that Master Sharam was willing to overlook the problem, and took the very best care of Payman to make sure they maintained the winning tradition. But Payman was suffering. And the whole Sharam family felt sorry for him.

One day, while she was working in the garden, a summer intern said something that really got Payman's attention. She said it was a shame that Payman wasn't at her community garden back home, because there was a pastor who volunteered there who could surely cure the blight. Well, as you can imagine, Payman was eager to try anything to end his misery, and he told the Master Gardener what the intern had said. And the gardener was willing to do anything to help his prime potato, so he sent Payman to the community garden in the small town in Rockingham County from which the intern came, along with a letter that explained the situation and a very generous donation check.

When the head of the community garden received the letter, he read it aloud – "I have sent you Payman, my prime potato, having heard that you all are able to cure the blight." When he pulled the check out of the envelope, he was so surprised he almost fainted. But then he got angry. "Do those Shenandoah know-it-alls think I am a fool?" he said. "Where do they get off sending me a potato with blight? Who do they think I am, God almighty? I can't cure blight. They have to be up to something... maybe they think we are a threat in the next State Fair... Maybe this is some kind of Trojan Horse trick..."

One of the workers in the garden heard what was going on, and sent a quick message to the volunteer pastor he knew was really good at healing diseased veggies. Alisha texted right back asking why all the uproar? They were good people and good gardeners, and it didn't matter where the potato was from. If she could help, she would be glad to do so.

So Payman and his entourage went to Pastor Alisha's house, and rang the bell. They stood waiting on the porch for a while, and when the door finally opened, it wasn't Alisha, but her

babysitter. He handed Payman a note that said, "I've heard about you. Go and wash up in the North River. Do it seven times, and you will be blight free."

Payman stalked off the porch, muttering under his breath. "You would think, after coming all this way to see her and the big donation we sent to her garden, that she would at least have been willing to come out and meet me, lay hands on me and pray for healing, or something! But what do I get – take a dip in the North River. The North River! The Shenandoah is in my own backyard, and she tells me to jump in the North River if I want to be clean!"

But one of Payman's friends caught up to him as he was stomping away. "I know you are disappointed you didn't get to meet Alisha, but don't you think you should give her advice a chance? After all, if she had come out and told you that you would need to do something really hard and really costly, you would have done it wouldn't you? So, what could it hurt to visit her North River and see if her seven-lather cure works?"

As much as Payman hated to admit it, he knew sense when he heard it. So he went down to the North River, and washed himself in it seven times, as per Pastor Alisha's instructions. And what do you know – the blight was indeed washed away. And Payman the Prime Potato, after seeing his newly appealing potato skins, was positively pumped!

Am I Phil Vischer or what? (For those wondering who that is, Phil Vischer is the creator of Veggie Tales ☺). I think Payman the Potato might be money...

So, while you were listening to this riveting tale, were you thinking about the question I had asked at the beginning? Which of the characters in Naaman's story best served the interests of both their own people and the common good?

That is one of the questions I was asking myself as I began to prepare for today's sermon. With it being the July 4th weekend, I was thinking about our own nation, and what relevant lessons we might learn from Naaman's story, punctuated as it is with strong religious, cultural, and political themes. The question had a two-fold inspiration. First, there was today's Galatians text, which follows immediately on the heels of last week's scripture featuring the fruit of the Spirit. So I was already in the mindset of thinking about the "fruit" of our life and labor, so to speak. But today's text really piled it on for me. "*All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride.*"¹ "*You reap whatever you sow.*"² "*Let us not grow weary in doing what is right.*"³ "*Whenever we have the opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.*"⁴ So I was already looking at the story of Naaman through the lens it has been paired with in Galatians 6...asking what kind of seeds were being sown in Naaman's story by the various actors, whether they were working for the good of all or just their own, what we might learn from their actions today, etc.

But this question was also inspired by a discussion that was led by one of the student leaders in a BSM meeting a few years ago. They had been the first to introduce me to the Good Country Index⁵, a composite statistic of 35 data points mostly generated by the United Nations, which seeks to measure how much each of the 163 countries on the list contribute to the planet and to the human race through their policies and behaviors. The concept was designed by policy advisor

¹ Galatians 6:4

² 6:7b

³ 6:9

⁴ 6:10

⁵ <https://www.goodcountry.org/>

Simon Anholt in 2014, and who spoke about it in a popular TED Talk⁶ which is how this student had first learned of it. The idea is not to pass moral judgment on countries, but rather to measure the impact – both positive and negative – that a country’s decisions and actions have on the earth and the common good of its people. It includes a wide range of data in categories such as science and technology, culture, international peace and security, world order, planet and climate, prosperity and equality, and health and well-being.⁷

This student leader was challenging us to apply this kind of thinking to the church (and our campus ministry) – asking what makes a church or ministry “good” – and then evaluating ourselves and our ministries accordingly. As they were explaining the concept to us, they said that a “good country” or a “good church” or a “good ministry” could be identified in much the same way – it is one that would leave a gaping hole if it wasn’t there, one that its neighbors would sorely miss. One that didn’t just benefit its own citizens or congregants or members, but that contributed to the good of the whole – whether that be the global community, the neighborhood, or the campus.

Now I won’t tell you anything more about the good country index. If you are curious about it, you can do what I did and look it up, listen to the TED Talk. I will say that you might be surprised by the index rankings. But that was the kind of question which I was trying to bring to the story of the healing of Naaman this week. Where in this story do I see the fruit of a “good” [person, country, culture, religion]? Which character(s) actions benefited not only themselves or their own people, but also contributed to the common good, or as Galatians put it, whose work bore fruit “for the good of all?”

And I have to tell you – it wasn’t until I took the time to try to retell the story in a Veggie idiom that I arrived at my answer. If it isn’t something you have ever tried to do, I highly recommend it as a creative way to study narrative scriptures. There isn’t a much better way to discern the essential elements of a story than to try to tell it again, but in a different way.

So, back to my question – which of the characters in Naaman’s story best served the interests of both their own people and the common good?

Was it Naaman, who was willing to try anything to be healed?

Was it the serving girl, who suggested to way that her captor might find that healing?

What about the king of Aram, who was willing to seek aid to benefit Naaman from even his enemies?

Or the king of Israel, who was sure that Aram was trying to pick a fight with him, but who trusted the advice of the prophet enough to go along with it?

Was it Elisha, who offered healing even to the commander of an enemy army?

Or Naaman’s servants, who took the risk to challenge their master’s initial anger at Elisha’s instructions, and encouraged Naaman to give them a try?

If you think I am going to tell you the answer, you may be disappointed. The truth is I don’t think there is one – there are many. In fact, from a certain perspective, I think all of the characters in this story contributed to the common good, a fact that isn’t always appreciated. Just ask Jesus, who

⁶ https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_anholt_which_country_does_the_most_good_for_the_world?language=en

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good_Country_Index

caused an uproar in his Nazareth synagogue when he alluded to the story of Naaman in suggesting that God sometimes offers preferential treatment to outsiders.⁸

If we are looking to the scriptures to provide answers to our questions, I think we will often be disappointed. So much of the Bible comes to us in story form. It's one of the reasons I love *Veggie Tales* – the story always remains central. And one of the wonderful things about stories is that they inspire and instruct, they impact and influence, but they don't yield answers. In fact, they often lead to more questions, which can be discussed and debated and disputed endlessly. And it is in that engagement with the story that the scripture comes alive with God's Spirit. It's one of the things I have come to love about the Hebrew scriptures, and the Jewish approach to them. The late Christian writer Rachel Held Evans reminded me of that in her book *Inspired*, when she wrote, "*While Christians tend to turn to Scripture to end a conversation, Jews turn to Scripture to start a conversation.*"⁹

So back to my question once more: Which of the characters in Naaman's story best served the interests of both their own people and the common good? I think it's the kind of question that could start a good conversation. Add in there the question of what we could learn from this story – as individuals or as a congregation, as the Church of the Brethren or even as citizens in the democracy of the United States of America – and we have the makings of a rich and quite possibly fruitful conversation. They are the kind of questions that at our best we should be asking in our personal scripture study. And I think they are the kind of questions that we should be asking in board and council and commission meetings in our congregation. At our best, they are the kinds of questions that the Church of the Brethren has gathered to discern together at our Annual Conferences, as many of our folks have been doing this week in Greensboro; and again, at our best, they are the kinds of questions that citizens of a democracy such as our own debate in all manner of public and private forums where we seek to figure out how to do good not only for ourselves, but for all the earth and our global neighbors.

For as Paul reminds us, we must test our work. We must question both our motives and our actions, and the fruit that they yield. And if we truly reap what we sow, then there is no more pressing question for us than what it means to "do good" as our bulletin suggests and as Paul advises us to work for, for the good of all.

May our answers be worthy of a Veggie Tale of our own!

⁸ Luke 4:27

⁹ Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*. (2018)