

Faith Mennonite Church
Things that make for peace
July 6, 2008

Breaking Bread with Enemies and Outcasts
2 Kings 6:8-23

The story of how Elisha defeats the Aramean armies reflects some of the most difficult (and even disturbing) dimensions of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but also contains some of my personal favorites Biblical images or themes. It gets to one of the most difficult questions with which Christians have to struggle: How do we reconcile the constant warfare of the Israelites with the teachings of Jesus. For centuries, the answer for Christians has been: *With Great Difficulty*.

In the second century, the theologian Marcion tried to solve this problem by completely separating Christianity from Judaism. He rejected the Old Testament in its entirety and said that warlike Yahweh was a different from God of love preached by Jesus. Marcion was ultimately excommunicated and Marcionism is considered a heresy by orthodox theologians. But as I read the stories of Israel and Judah in Judges, Kings, and Chronicles, with all of their wars and killings and judgments, I can understand the desire to simply dismiss the Hebrew Bible and focus on the Gospel of Christ. However, this would be to separate Jesus from his own Jewish story.

That is why I find today's passages so exciting is that it suggests that the values and teachings of Jesus are present in the so-called "Old Testament" as well.

To exact his revenge on Elisha for spoiling an invasion, the king of the Arameans, sent horses and chariots and a great army to capture and kill God's prophet. One of Elisha's servants freaks out a little when he steps out of his house in the morning and sees the Arameans surrounding the camp. To calm him down, Elisha opens the servants' eyes so that he sees that the entire mountain was covered with horses and chariots of fire. This spiritual army reflects back to the beginning of 2 Kings, when a chariot and horse of fire appeared when Elijah was taken up to heaven. It is also important to remember that, if this is God's spiritual army, that it is the most sophisticated army of the day. The chariot was the stealth fighter or Abrams tank of the day.

Even given this spiritual arsenal, Elisha doesn't use violence against the Arameans. Elisha asked God to blind them and then leads them into the neighboring country. Elisha now has to answer questions similar to those that the U.S. asked after the invasion of Iraq or Afghanistan. What do we do with the prisoners? The military logic of that time would have been to kill them or at least blind them, but Elisha instead prepares a great feast for them and sends them on their way after they ate and drank.

This is the type of passage that people in the peace churches like. It shows a true man of God treating his enemies with love and compassion and the result being that they no longer bothered him. However, this passage is confusing because it is actually NOT Elisha's normal way of dealing with his enemies. In 2 Kings chapter 2, he curses a group of small boys who are teasing him about being "follicly challenged," saying "go away bald head, go away." Elisha curses them, immediately after which two she-bears come out of the woods and maul the boys. On his deathbed, Elisha chastises the king of Israel for not attacking the Arameans aggressively enough! So Elisha is not normally the type to feed his enemies.

The books of the Old Testament are filled with stories of the Israelites waging war against each other and their neighbors. At times, God appears to even command them to commit

genocide. These stories are troubling for those of us who follow Jesus' command to be peacemakers, not warriors. As Christians, we find ourselves on the horns of the dilemma, how do we balance the stories of peacemakers with the wars of the Israelites.

I think that Elisha's treatment of the Arameans dispels the notion that peacemaking is totally absent from the Old Testament. It is much closer to the idea of the God and God's kingdom that I find Jesus preaching. Jesus often describes the kingdom of God as a feast or a banquet. This is especially true in Luke's Gospel. What is especially remarkable about this feast is that it is not just for God's favorite, but also for former enemies and the outcasts. This radical type of dining wasn't just for the future kingdom of God, but Jesus practiced it himself.

In **Luke 5**, Jesus eats at a banquet with tax collectors and sinners. He is not just doing this to be provocative but because these are the very people that he has called to repentance. In **Luke 13**, Jesus says that people will come from north and south, east and west to eat the feast in the kingdom of God. In **Luke 14**, Jesus says, "...when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.' Finally, in **Luke 15**, we read the famous parable of the prodigal son. When a father gave a banquet to his son who had squandered his inheritance on prostitutes and dissolute living.

Jesus often talks about feasting and banquets as a type of radical discipleship. We throw parties and eat with our enemies, the poor, or tax collectors. I love the idea of the Kingdom of God as a party with food, dancing, and singing. Perhaps it is good for serious Mennonites to remember that life with God is to be a joyous celebration. Eating a meal, especially a feast can be a very intimate and spiritual affair. And eating with our enemies pushes our comfort boundaries.

There is something very spiritual about giving a eating and giving a meal for others. Christians acknowledge this in many different ways. The early Christians remembered the death and life of Christ by breaking bread and drinking wine with one another in communion. They also had a separate meal called the Agape meal or the love feast which celebrated unity, and the forgiveness of past sins. The Church of the Brethren and the Moravians continue this practice today. Christians are people have always used meals to show their reconciliation with one another.

In recent decades and with a quickening pace today, we have grown aware of the justice of the dinner table. That what we eat, where it came from, how it was produced are linked with fundamental questions of peace and justice. Books like *More with Less* and *Extending the Table*, emphasize that when we eat, we take part in a global network of producers and consumers. We are encouraged to rethink what we eat as an act of communion with those who are really suffering from the Global Food Crisis. Even our government, thanks be to God, tried to give food and aid to Burma after it was hit by a typhoon. Perhaps a key weapon in overcoming our enemies is to show them that we can relate to other countries by sharing our wealth rather than through military force.

Which brings us back to Elisha: In preparing for this sermon, I read the entire book of 2 Kings. This is a bloody book with assassinations and war and slaughter of prisoners. But in this passage, in this place, we see another view of how God might want us to work. Elisha may be Yahweh's prophet, but he is not always a peaceful man. Nonetheless, he gives a taste, or perhaps and appetizer, of the feast of the Kingdom of God that Jesus will inaugurate. In this kingdom, people are to break bread with their enemies and the outcasts.

Both Proverbs and Romans say people in the kingdom will treat their enemies in the same way that Elisha treated the Arameans. These are the words that I want to end with today. “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:9-21).

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