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First Congregational Church UCC of Burlington Vermont  
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Sermon: "Friends and Foes"

Scripture: 2 Kings 5: 1-17; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20 (full text follows sermon in print copy)

As a "newbie" on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend, of course I want to know where the parade is. It appears as though Burlington has a big gathering at the waterfront to watch the fireworks, which sounds like fun, but no parade. In the spirit of friendly competition, I must tell you that the town I just came from, East Longmeadow, Mass. has the biggest, baddest parade in the area which I enjoyed last year with my grandson. So it's not that I feel deprived: July 4<sup>th</sup> just puts me in a parade sort of mindset.

Parades had their origin in military and political displays of power. "The Last Week", a book by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, puts the events of Holy Week in a new perspective. In it, they say that Jesus' unpretentious Palm Sunday parade into the East Gate of Jerusalem was staged as a contrast to a bigger event happening on the other side of town: Pontius Pilate entering Jerusalem's victory gate in a demonstration of Roman superiority. The authors suggest that Jesus intentionally created his entry in marked contrast to that of the Empire, showing that his leadership as messiah had nothing to do with military might and everything to do with cooperative leadership and mutual ministry.

A parade not of power, but of love.

The two scriptures we heard today are both long stories, with multiple themes to explore, and it would be tempting to charge off in several directions at once. What I want to focus on this morning is how Biblical stories help us to reshape our thinking and our behavior in a way that the secular world cannot.

First is the story of the mighty Syrian general Naaman, the conquering hero of the Kingdom of Aram to the north. He had decisively defeated the kingdom of Israel and paraded home to Syria with a pile of loot, material goods as well as slaves. You might think he'd be ready to retire in luxurious peace, but Naaman is not physically healthy. He has what the Bible calls leprosy, not Hansen's disease, but something like psoriasis. One of the Hebrew slave girls he has kidnapped remarks that her master could find a cure from the prophets of Yahweh in her native land. So, with the blessing of his King, Naaman heads up another parade, full of expensive goods and livestock, ready to buy his cure in Israel.

With his military mindset, he goes first to the King, center of political power in Israel. That King is terrified of his inability to produce such a cure. But Yahway's prophet

Elisha comes to the rescue, saying “Send him my way.” Not even bothering to see the patient, Elisha sends a cure in the form of a prescription: go and wash three times in the Jordan River. Naaman has an angry outburst of pride in response: Are there no magic words or tricks? Just wash in this muddy little stream so far inferior to the mighty rivers of Syria? These worthless, second-rate Israelites infuriate him. Fortunately, he once again is willing to take directions from his seemingly powerless servants: just give it a try! It works, and then Naaman worships God.

Who is Naaman’s foe, and who is his friend? Remarkably, those whom he has thought to be his enemies are truly his supporters: these marginalized servants, these foreigners with no military or political power, have his best interests in mind. What they DO have is the power of faith in a living, healing God. That’s what works for Naaman. AND it turns out to be free.

Let’s turn to the second story in the gospel, a passage commonly known as the sending of the seventy. This is a model for mission, and a wonderful example of empowering lay leadership that we could follow in our modern churches. Jesus sends out a big crowd of seventy people, but no one is alone: they are all in pairs, and know that they are part of an even bigger “church” of seventy. They are sent to preach the nearness of the Kingdom of God, and the possibility of healing. But this time there is no parade, just a “travel light” pilgrimage with no extras, no money, just the instructions to preach, to heal, and to receive the hospitality offered to them. Jesus says stay in the places you are welcomed, and if you do not receive hospitality, just leave.

Who are the friends and foes of these Jesus people? Is it as simple as saying your friends are the ones who receive you, and your foes are those who do not? Is it appropriate to divide all the world into friends and foes? Later, when they return to Jesus, we learn that it’s not that simple. The missionaries are all excited about the power they have to effect change, about trampling on snakes and scorpions and exorcising demons. Jesus reframes their success. Yes, perhaps we have seen Satan falling from the sky. But power, especially power over someone or something, is not the point. The point is that you have become part of the Kingdom of God, where peace reigns and enmity is no more. Don’t rejoice in your newfound ability to overpower something; rejoice in the love which makes it possible.

In recognition of the Independence Day holiday, and to reinforce my point of moving beyond a division of the world into friends and foes, here is a story from a historical novel I just read called “The Rebellion of Jane Clark” by Sally Gunning. She is a great author, both impeccable in her research and gifted in creating ordinary characters to inhabit the historical space she recreates. I can’t wait for her fourth book to come out in September.

The time is just before the American Revolution. Jane Clarke, the heroine hailing from a small town on the shore of southeastern Massachusetts, has just refused to marry

the man her domineering father has chosen for her: not because she doesn't like him but because she doesn't KNOW him, and as an independent thinker she demands that right. In punishment, her father sends her off to the nascent city of Boston to care for an elderly sickly aunt. Without giving it away, I will only say that the alliances and the politics on the eve of the Revolution are not always what they seem. Young Jane meets everyone, including the educated and accomplished British commander who is in charge of young British soldiers. The troops are quartered in private homes in the city after the infamous event of the Boston Tea Party. She also meets members of the fiery group of young men known as the Sons of Liberty. And she also meets people through her grandfather and brother who are some of the foremost lawyers and politicians, namely John Adams and Sam Adams and James Otis. Through Jane's eyes we are drawn into the midst of the plans and legal maneuvering of some of our country's most visionary forefathers.

But at the same time, we glimpse up close and personal some of the extremist ideologues who made up the Sons of Liberty. Rabble rousers in the worst sense of the word.

Who are friends and who are foes is not as clearcut as our history books would make it. The climax of Jane's story is her presence at the edge of the event now known as the Boston Massacre where she witnesses that some of the lawless rogue elements are actually the ones who provoked the British soldiers to shoot, with taunts and even with rocks. The story concludes with the trial of her acquaintance the British commander, legally defended by John Adams himself and actually acquitted of the charges.

This story is surely entertaining for us on the eve of Independence Day, but it is also a good illustration of how difficult it is to separate people into friends and foes in such a context. Jane's sympathies are with the revolutionaries, but she is clear-eyed and honest enough to perceive the inhumane and uncivil actions of some of the revolutionaries. Put lethal weapons into such a context – and in our time we're no longer talking about Revolutionary era blunderbusses, but modern AK-47 automatic rifles – the fatal flaw of power over others becomes very clear. Hospitality and generosity, law and civility, kindness and truth, are clearly the better path.

We have zoomed through three stories this morning and the most obvious lesson learned is to heed Jesus' advice and not separate people into categories such as friend or foe, but rather to allow them the consequences of their own choices. We must concentrate on how we can become the messengers and missionaries of the good news of God's love and healing.

When we emphasize differences, when seek power over one another (including but not exclusive to the military realm) then we will always end up with winners and losers, with good guys and bad guys. It is God's intention for us to live together as one without creating those labels.

Unfortunately we seem to live in a time in which differences are emphasized as a source for fear and manipulation. Witness the recent Brexit decision in UK. Witness the rise of a presidential campaign calling for radical restrictions on immigration and on those of a certain religious faith in our own country to be banned.

The church has the possibility of modelling another way, of refusing to be divided into friends and foes. It is at the center of our faith to be about undermining the political power of violence and instead uplifting the path of reconciliation and unity. Jesus urges us toward a Third Way: toward giving and receiving hospitality, toward being not only civil but loving toward one another, and toward seeking forgiveness and healing at every opportunity, beginning with ourselves.

May we be blessed this Independence Day weekend as we seek to be a force for peace and reconciliation in our community. Amen.

#### SCRIPTURE READINGS:

2 Kings 5: 1-17

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel."

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and

Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.'

"Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me."

The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."