Last week, Ellen explained that the wisdom or "discernment" King Solomon prays for in his dream translates literally from the original Hebrew text as a request for a "God-listening" heart. Having seen his father and countless others before him distracted by other voices or motivations that generate serious and potentially catastrophic consequences, Solomon asks for and apparently receives the ability to hear God's still small voice. Amid all the cacophony around him, competing for his limited attention, Solomon's gift was the ability to shut out the noise and hear what it was that God wanted. In our time, the voices that compete for our attention are more numerous and just as loud as ever. Let us nevertheless attempt, if we can, to listen for what the Spirit may be saying to us through our narrative lectionary reading, which comes to us from the fifth chapter of the Second Book of Kings, verses one through fourteen:

> *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 a skin disease. 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 skin disease." 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 skin disease." 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 skin disease? 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 skin disease! 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.*

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

You probably know by now that my wife Jordan and I are both vegan. But I admit that there was a time when this plant-based pastor enjoyed few food items more than barbecue, bacon, and burgers. To combine two of the three—as Wendy's did in 2007 with the Baconator—seemed to my teenage taste buds like a stroke of genius. Enough so that when on youth group trips to Montreat or Atlanta, I and a few of my peers would make sure that our youth pastor knew when we were passing an exit with a Wendy's within the reasonable vicinity of dinnertime.

The Reverend Ben Acton was usually happy to oblige. Those who were less enthusiastic about the Baconator were generally happy with a Frosty and fries. However, in my final year of high school and youth group activities here at First Presbyterian Church, I remember Ben telling us on our way for a weekend of mission and service in Asheville that there would not be a Wendy's stop this trip, as the chain was the lone fast-food giant refusing at that time to sign the Fair Food Program contract.

The Fair Food Program was launched in 2011 by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a human rights organization led by visionary immigrant women and low-wage workers in Immokalee, Florida, a community that federal prosecutors described almost twenty years ago as "ground zero for modern slavery." Facing poverty wages, child labor abuses, hard work in dangerous heat, and staggering rates of gender-based harassment and assault, the Coalition organized the Program as an attempt to get major grocers and fast food chains to agree together to purchase tomatoes and berries only from farms that could show that they were working to protect some of society's most vulnerable members.

The Fair Food Program represented an unprecedented "partnership among farmers, farmworkers, and retail food companies that ensures humane wages and working conditions for workers who pick fruits and vegetables" (Copley 2019). The Coalition built relationships with tomato farms beyond Florida, across Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Maryland, Virginia, and New Jersey, and then connected participating farms to large retail buyers. Within a couple of years of community organizing and making powerful moral arguments, more than fourteen fast-food chains and grocers had signed. Wendy's, however, was the largest corporate holdout. Their refusal to join the Program prompted the Coalition to call for a Baconator boycott in 2013, my senior year of high school. In 2016, the General Assembly of our denomination voted to endorse the Immokalee Workers' boycott against Wendy's, becoming the first Christian institution to do so. That vote came a few years after that youth group trip, but the Presbyterian Hunger Program had collaborated with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers since 2002 on various human rights campaigns. Through that shared work and ministry, our youth pastor heard about the conditions in Immokalee and about how Wendy's was fighting against the Fair Food Program. And when he told us that we would be taking our money and our adolescent appetites elsewhere on the way up to Asheville, I learned a lesson about how crucial it is to look or listen to *other people* when we seek to discern God's will for us.

Those other people may live in Immokalee, or they may reside on the other side of the world. They may speak to us in the present or through the distant past, in tones that we can hear audibly or in texts that preserve fundamental stories and folk narratives for future generations. In

today's verses, we listen to a variety of voices that are at once ancient and archetypal—ancient in the sense that their metaphysical view of reality is radically different from our own, and yet archetypal in the sense that their emotional experiences and motivations are strikingly modern, recognizable and familiar to farmworkers and faithful disciples thousands of years on.

Our pericope begins with the name of Naaman, a powerful commander of the Syrian army, who has recently prevailed on the battlefield against the kingdom of Israel, and yet who simultaneously suffers from a debilitating skin condition. Naaman's worldview and words may strike us as ancient insofar as he expects to be cured by a magician or miracle worker "waving" his or her hand over the wound. At the same time, like Zacchaeus and the Roman centurion in the Gospel according to Luke, Naaman's archetypal journey reveals that God's grace extends far beyond our own limited love. Divine mercy and compassion are not only available to outsiders, but even to those whom we might mistakenly refer to as enemies. In healing Naaman, this text teaches us that friend and foe are our terms, *not* God's.

Between Naaman and the relief he seeks, there are two kings who—in contrast with Solomon—noticeably lack the gift of a God-listening heart. We are reminded of how *ancient* the king of Israel is by the fact that he rips his robes in lament when Naaman arrives in his court, asking for help. There are also, however, archetypal aspects to each of these rulers. Like so many of us who assume that peace, justice, a fair contract, or good news begin above us—in good policy or benevolent leadership—the king of Aram or present-day Syria assumed that if there was a prophet with power to heal Naaman living in Samaria, that prophet would or should have been connected to the royal palace. This archetypal king associates the power to heal with political power, the same power he possesses and desperately clings to.

The unnamed king of Israel, likewise, is clinging to political power that he is struggling to hold on to. Assuming that Naaman is only there to trap him, to ask for a miracle as a pretense for another siege, this king panics. What he says in his anxiety is not theologically incorrect. But his question: "*Am I God, to give death or life?*" suggests that the king is unable to hear God's voice. Inside the fortress walls that he and his predecessors have built to protect himself from popular revolt or foreign military commanders like Naaman, the king has disconnected himself from the other people that could *help* him to see and locate God's presence.

In his notes on this text, Yale Professor of Old Testament Robert Wilson (525) points out that "the king of Israel does not make the connection with Elisha at all." His paranoia has prevented him from hearing the stories that have been spreading across the countryside in the preceding chapters of the Second Book of Kings, in which Elisha has purified water, fed the multitudes, and even raised an only son from the dead. Just outside the palace walls, the dead have received new life and the hungry are being fed; nevertheless, the king appears to have no knowledge of the miracles transpiring around him.

Other voices in this story, however, are very aware of God's presence in Samaria. The voices that emanate from below—the wisdom that comes from servants and slaves and what historians call *subaltern* voices—are all in the know about "the prophet who is in Samaria." Naaman never reaches recovery if he, like the king, cuts himself off from these voices that come

from beneath his social status or beyond his experience. Song-Mi Suzie Park, Professor of Hebrew Bible at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, notes that if not for the courage and compassion of the young girl who is enslaved by his wife, Naaman would not have left for Samaria in the first place. And when he is angered by the task that Elisha places before him, it is his servants who encourage Naaman to put aside his ego and heed the prophet's instruction: "*if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it?*"

There is a lesson about the church in this passage. Discernment is never an individual assignment. It is a group project, and whether we are looking for healing or a place to grab dinner on a road trip, we would do well to listen to our neighbors, and especially those in need. When we cut out other voices, we only harm ourselves, isolating ourselves in a fortress of solitude or failing to hear from those who know where we can find healing, who have heard that in Elisha there is a prophet in Samaria.

Elisha is strange and ancient as well in his advice to "*wash in the Jordan seven times*." The task he sets before the commander is not informed by any principles of modern medicine. Nor is it what we expect from those we call prophets. We in the twenty-first century tend to speak about biblical and modern prophets not as those who send heroes on legendary quests and wave their hands over wounds. Rather, we often frame prophecy in a way that more closely resembles what King Lemuel's mother tells him in the thirty-first chapter of Proverbs: "*speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out; judge righteously; defend the rights of the poor and needy*."

Yet Arundhati Roy, author of *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, remarked in 2004 that there is "really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard." Roy argues that anyone and everyone—you and me and her and every child of God beyond these doors—has something to say, some access to the truth that they and we all see in part, but not in full. Whether we make room for those around us to share that truth—and whether we listen to what they choose to say—is what we really ought to call prophetic. It is not the task of the prophet to speak *over* or *for* those who cannot speak, but to amplify those whose cries for help have not been heeded, to bring their experiences into places from which they have been excluded, and help us all to hear and learn from the voices that we might otherwise shut out.

It would not be difficult for us in Concord to ignore the calls articulated seven hundred miles away in Immokalee. Many of the workers in that "ground zero for modern slavery" do not speak English or possess the legal protections that come with citizenship. Nevertheless, those workers have been speaking together in a unified voice for almost a quarter of a century, speaking not only to shareholders and corporate executives but to all of us, asking for us to witness and respond to the burdens they bear on our behalf. I will never forget my youth pastor Ben passing their words on to me in my senior year of high school, reminding me and my friends that when we listen for what God is saying to us, it may come not from any heavenly intercom system above but rather from the voices that ask for our attention, our solidarity, or our mercy.

When asked to sum up the Torah, Jesus told his inquisitors that "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your [God-listening] heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it,"* he adds: *'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*" If I can be permitted to elaborate on the logic of one who not only raised others from the dead like Elisha, but who himself was raised, I would say that Jesus' analysis of the law in the Gospel according to Matthew tells us that loving and listening to others is like loving and listening to God. A God-listening heart is an other-listening heart, for it is often through the voices of our neighbors in need.

We can choose not to listen to their voice or the other voices that call to us. But in this text we see that grace and healing come to Naaman not through his own logic or might, or even through Elisha's miraculous power to heal the sick. It comes as a gift from God that he is able to receive because he is first able to listen to the voices who see things more clearly that he does, who see things from another vantage point below. He listens to others who talk some sense into him, who help him to see the bigger picture, who share the good news with him, and who help him to see that something as small and seemingly trivial as a bath in the river or a decision over where and what to eat during a boycott might be exactly what brings the healing we seek. Amen.