

The world of retail commerce is changing, and fast. I have for several years gone to my local Sports Authority store to buy exercise clothes and, when I need it, equipment, but Sports Authority filed for bankruptcy, and though the Tucson store near me is still open for another month, they are liquidating their inventory, but my last trip found nothing I wanted nor needed as.

Online sales and outlet malls are to blame, as I understand it, and sports equipment is not the only area; office supplies and equipment are another. OfficeMax and Office Depot are merging — I am not sure what the survivor is being called, — and Staples, to my mind the best of such stores, is concentrating more on its online business than on its stores, of which it has closed a good number, including *my* Staples, in Tucson.

I miss Staples; it was my favorite.

Now, if you have never been to any of these office supply stores, it is not that you are missing anything, but you have probably seen the Staples TV commercials with Staples' "Easy" button. The idea's being, I guess, using Staples makes buying office supplies *easy*.



Some would object to my saying so, but I would like to put an “easy” button outside our churches. It’s *easy* to enter in, it’s *easy* to be accepted, and it’s *easy* to be a Christian.

Now, no one would object to those first two “easy’s,” but some might object to my saying, “*it’s easy to be a Christian.*” In fact, we often want it to be seen not as *easy*, but the opposite: “We Christians are really good people, and you are not, so you cannot be a Christian like us.” We love to sing, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,” but we know the next words, “that saved a wretch like me” do not really apply to any of *us*. You’ve got to be really good, really adhere to God’s laws — or at least the one’s we think matter — to be a Christian . . . to be a Christian like us.

And for biblical authority on how *difficult* it is to be a person of faith, to be a Christian, we cite . . . hmm, we cite . . . well, let’s see. Let’s look at two of the Scriptures we have read today.

The first is the delightful story of Naaman and Elisha. To me, 2 Kings is filled with some delightful stories as we dealt first with Elijah and then, after being introduced to him last week, in this week’s story we encounter again Elijah’s successor, Elisha. In this wonderful story, we meet a general who was an enemy of Israel — we are in the time of the split kingdoms of Israel and Judah before Israel, whose capital was Samaria, disappeared after its conquest by the Assyrians in 722 BCE. We meet a general who was an *enemy* of Israel, who conducted raids into the land, yet, in the story, this general goes to see a prophet in Israel to cure the general of a *virulent skin disease*, or, in some translations, Naaman was a *leper!*

There is humor and meat that I do not want us to miss; part of the humor is that the king of Aram, roughly what we would call “Syria,” would ask his enemy, the King of Israel, for help for a general who had staged raids into Israel; the meat comes in several ways, but one of which that is easy to miss is that these “virulent skin diseases,” “leprosy,” would cause the sufferer to be shunned by others.

So Naaman goes to the (unnamed) King of Israel, who is none too thrilled for it to be assumed that he could help Naaman. The king tears his clothes and apparently does nothing else, but word of his tearing his clothes gets to Elisha. Elisha does not go to the King, but has Naaman sent to him, and then, Elisha — sends him a message! Elisha does not even see nor speak to Naaman, but sends the message, '*Go and bathe seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will become clean once more.*'

That's it! Go and bathe seven times, and Naaman feels slighted, since he was apparently expecting some dramatic appeal to Yahweh. But his servants talk him into doing what Elisha recommended. He bathes, it works, and "*his flesh became clean once more like the flesh of a little child.*"

My desire to be taken seriously as a scholar of the Bible makes me reluctant to say that such a message is intended by the Scripture, but my inclination is to read more into this story than is perhaps intended, "Listen to the words of the prophet and you will become like new." And there is in fact such a message in a Hebrew Bible parallel, in Psalm 51: *Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.*¹ I like that idea, and it certainly is something we experience in Jesus.

In fact, in Naaman's story and the psalm, do we get an idea of from whence came the idea of the sort of baptism that John performed?

But whether I read in too much or not, it was easy for Naaman to be . . . to be? Well, I'll leave that to you, as I say, I think the story *is* about more than his being cured of his skin disease, but whatever it was, *it was easy!* He did not have to recite any creeds nor perform any rituals; he just had to wash seven times in the Jordan, and his *virulent skin condition* was healed.

¹ Psalm 51:7 (NRSV)

And Paul, in his very important letter to the Galatians from which we have been reading excerpts, the one I read today was actually in last week's Lectionary, but I thought if fit well with today's Hebrew Bible reading and our Independence Day, Paul offers his version of the "easy button." Paul makes it *easy* to remember the crux of God's law: *the whole of the Law is summarized in the one commandment:*

You must love your neighbor as yourself.

Intellectual honesty compels me to add what Paul said by way of introduction and following: self-indulgence does not show love for the neighbor, but just love for one's self. So it is a far more restrictive *and demanding* command than it might seem to be, but it is *easy* to remember . . . and something for which we need to aspire to comply.

For suppose it was a command such as, "Pray three times a day, do not cut your hair off above your shoulders" or the like; certainly we would try to obey. But almost paraphrasing the very sharp servants of Naaman, "all the more reason, then, when he says to us, 'Love your neighbor,' that we should do so."

An easy button for recalling the measure by which we should lead our lives: *love our neighbor.*

And when we remember that, we should dispense with all need to look down on those who are not yet Christians, those who are still outside our doors, and to realize the way to bring them to Christ is, indeed, to show that we know how to use our "easy button," and to offer that same easy button to them.

I miss my Staples store in Tucson, but I have an "easy button." I just need to use it more often.

Amen