



breadfortheworld
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

February 12, 2012, Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

By Charles L. Campbell

2 Kings 5:1–14

Psalm 30

1 Corinthians 9:24–27

Mark 1:40–45

Introduction

Radical Christian and theologian William Stringfellow argues that the healings in the Bible should be construed as involving not just individual, physical healings, but also political resistance to the powers of death: Healing, seemingly, is a most intimate event, distinct and distant from politics. Yet the healing episodes reported in the New Testament are very much implicated in politics. . . . In raising Lazarus, . . . Jesus reveals what is implicit, but hidden, in all of the healing episodes, that is, his authority over death, his conclusive power over death, his triumph over death and all that death can do and all that death means. To so surpass death is utterly threatening politically; it shakes and shatters the very foundation of political reality because death is, as has been said, the only moral and practical sanction of the State.¹

1 Corinthians 9:24–27

In many ways, Paul is a version of Elisha, crossing religious boundaries to bring good news to Gentiles and to welcome them into the people of God. It is difficult to imagine the radical change in Paul from one who violently persecuted the followers of Christ to one whose mission was to preach the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles. Paul had been freed from the powers of death that hold people captive in their sense of social, ethnic, and religious superiority. It is difficult to imagine a more radical witness to Paul's boundary-crossing Jesus than his baptismal confession in Galatians: In Christ, "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female" (Gal. 3:28).

This boundary-crossing, gospel race is the one Paul runs in 1 Corinthians 9:24–27. The character of this race is made clear in the preceding verses, in which Paul relates the various ways his life and witness have crossed multiple boundaries for the sake of the gospel. Indeed, the character of the gospel compels and creates this kind of boundary-crossing witness and community. For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law). . . . To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak.

I have become all things to all people that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings. (1 Cor. 9:19–23) At one level, Paul might sound like a chameleon who will gladly change colors, depending on whom he is addressing. However, at a deeper level, Paul simply lives out a



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gospel that does not stand on religious or ethnic superiority, but crosses those boundaries to serve the “other,” just as Jesus touched the leper and Elisha healed the enemy. As Richard Hays notes, “Paul represents himself as a conciliator, seeking to overcome cultural and ethnic divisions in order to bring people of all sorts into the one community of faith.”ⁱⁱ Indeed, Paul suggests, only by serving Christ in this way can he himself share in the gospel’s blessings (v. 23). The race he runs, the discipline he endures, is all for the purpose of “proclaiming to others,” so that, along with them, he too might enjoy the prize. For the imperishable wreath of “victory” belongs to the one whose freedom in Christ paradoxically empowers service to the “other.” Paul runs that race and calls the church to run it too.

ⁱRichard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation series (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 153.

ⁱⁱ Editor’s note: For examples of people who have been profoundly affected by boundary crossing, see the stories of seminary students and others who have worked with the homeless in Atlanta and engaged in street preaching and in public acts of resistance, in Stanley P. Saunders and Charles L. Campbell, *The Word on the Street: Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000).