

Sermon: Pentecost 6

The Rev. Mike Wernick

June 26, 2016

Year C

1 Kings 19:15-16,19-21

Psalm 16

Galatians 5:1,13-25

Luke 9:51-62

For freedom... Christ has set us free... we are *already* there... but we are also *not yet* there... we are actively taking part in the Kingdom of God... but the Kingdom will not reach it's full expression until some time in the future... we can already see some of it's Glory... but we do *not yet* see its full Glory... we can look back to the death and resurrection of Jesus... the most powerful sign of the Kingdom... but we also look forward... toward the future consummation of the ages...

Sometimes... it can feel like there's no Kingdom at all... and sometimes like there's so much Kingdom you couldn't pack any more Kingdom into it... sometimes it feels like nothing at all is working the way God intended... and sometimes like absolutely everything is working the way God intended... sometimes it seems like we're intent on destroying the other tribe... and sometimes it seems like we can't move on without them...

But when we're *already* there... and *not yet* there... when we can see the potential for how things could be... but also see how far we are from it... when we can smell it... but not taste it... it can be disheartening... when we focus too much on the progress we haven't made... and not enough on the progress we have made... it can be discouraging...

United Church of Christ... Pastor Andrew Nagy-Benson wrote: the prophet Elijah is blue... his efforts to uproot Israel's apostasy and to grow faithfulness in their fallow hearts has not produced desired results... the prophet feels discouraged... and this feeling is compounded by Jezebel's promise to kill him... the irony is not subtle... Elijah is at once... a wanted man and an unwanted mouthpiece of God...

Running on fear and frustration... Elijah reaches his end... sitting under a solitary broom tree... he says: *It is enough now, O Lord... take away my life... for I am no better than my ancestors...*

But God has other ideas... God accepts neither Elijah's resignation... nor his assessment of his failures... God meets him in the wilderness and recommissions him to his work... God says: *Go...* and promises the prophet a servant and successor who will carry on and complete Elijah's mission... to his credit... Elijah goes as directed and locates Elisha... and throws his mantle over him... it's like... *Tag... you're IT...* Elisha begins to follow... but hesitates... and Elijah realizes what he's asking... and says... *Go back again... for what have I done to you...*

As a son... Elisha would want to get his father's blessing... care for his parents... perhaps bury them... take care of the estate... but he goes back home to kiss his mom and dad goodbye... and then *really* burns his bridges by killing his twenty-four oxen... and at the beginning of this new ministry... he feeds hundreds...

Elisha lived an agrarian life... our Jewish Scripture reading tells us he was plowing... and it took some effort to guide the oxen in a straight line... modern tractors fitted with GPS devices make this child's play... but in order to get the most out of the field... you didn't want the rows to be too close together or too far apart... and so often... farmers would plant a row of trees... or use some other marker... to direct them forward... something to set their eye on... to help them keep their eye on the prize...

Because when you look back... you might see uneven rows... or curvy lines... you might see your mistakes and missed opportunities... you might criticize yourself... kick yourself for not having done more... and give up... but there's nothing we can do about our past... if however we set a goal and keep our eyes fixed on it... look to where we're going... not to a less perfect past... we'll keep making progress...

John's Gospel tells of Jesus stopping in Samaria so he can speak with a woman at a well... apparently Jesus has no problem with Samaritans... and Luke isn't necessarily saying anything different... maybe the point that Luke is making... is that by not receiving Jesus... the Samaritans were helping him... doing him a kindness... making it easier for him to progress on his mission... *go on... get outta here... you've got business in Jerusalem*... remember... Jesus asked whether this cup might be taken from him...

I've taken refuge in a few of my own Samarias... here and there... allowing myself to be or become comfortable... complacent... sometimes there was a real need for self-care... but sometimes it was to fly under the radar... escape detection... or just avoid some of what lay ahead of me... but in hindsight... I wish I had faced my own Jerusalem sooner... had died to my old self sooner... so I could be... more of who God wants me to be now...

So when Jesus says... *No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God*... I don't think he's finding fault what Elijah encouraged Elisha to do... I don't think he's encouraging us to be irresponsible... but I do believe he knows the urgency... and is trying to use powerful language... full of immediacy and *let's get on with things*... to convey God's powerful desire for the *not yet*... to become the *already* already...

Lutheran Seminary President David Lose wrote: setting his face towards Jerusalem is Jesus' commitment to embrace the cross... for the sake of the world... it is a single-minded purpose... prompted by God's profound love for humanity and for God's creation... this is why Jesus rejects James' and John's desire for vengeance...

Those of you who are Star Trek fans... may remember the episode about the Kobayashi Maru... a training exercise administered to cadets... as a way of measuring how they'll respond to failure... apparently... Elijah had taken it... but when James Kirk underwent

the test... he did something unexpected... he secretly re-programmed the simulation... and achieved the impossible... everyone's jaws dropped to the ground... they couldn't figure out how he did it... they just knew it wasn't supposed to happen... some would call it cheating... but Kirk did something unexpected... he thought outside the box... he freed himself from the letter of the Law and entertained the possibilities of an unstoppable Spirit of the Law...

When Bp. Gene Robinson was asked to pray at the inauguration of our President... he effectively asked God to free us from our collective Samarias... he asked God to bless us with things we would normally steer clear of... tears... for a world in which over a billion people exist on less than a dollar a day... anger at discrimination at home and abroad... and discomfort... at easy and simplistic answers... instead of the truth about ourselves and the world...

The Talmud exhorts us: *Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.*

I said when I began... that there is a disconnect between seeing the potential... and experiencing the reality... but the reality is... that we do not do God's work without God's help... we do not produce the fruit of the Spirit on our own or in a vacuum... but the fruit is produced in us... we are branches on the vine... and the vine gives us life... and God is plowing us... planting seeds in us... keeping our rows from being too narrow or too wide... because God wants to produce as much in us as possible...

And woven into the story of Elijah and Elisha... are our stories... Elijah's recommissioning and Elisha's commissioning are ours as well... we know some of their hesitation... because we also know some of what discipleship costs... but we also know it's joy... it's the joy of setting our faces towards the Spirit...

Pastor Fred Niedner wrote: the call to discipleship is not a summons to devalue... deny... or depart from the world and it's teeming hosts... but to give ourselves completely to the love and care of our neighbors... including... note this James and John... even those who write us off as fools... or refuse us hospitality... or kill those we love... indeed... with our dying breaths... we will ask God to forgive them... for they do not know what they are doing...

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