

Sermon: Pentecost 3

The Rev. Mike Wernick

June 30, 2019

Year C

1 Kings 19:15-16,19-21

Psalm 16

Galatians 5:1,13-25

Luke 9:51-62

For about a year and a half... I've been part of a weekly... iHeart radio show... called Soundings... we record the show on Monday morning... and it's broadcast on Sunday morning... there's one woman minister from the Reformed Church in America... who's a professor at GVSU... and three Roman Catholic priests... who take turns...

In the weekly introduction... we say that Soundings is an *ecumenical discussion of today's scriptures and how they apply to today's world*... almost always... our discussion is limited to the Gospel... but as we know... the Revised Common Lectionary also includes the Jewish scriptures... and a Psalm or Canticle... and usually one of the Epistles... these other readings shed more light on... and add depth to the Gospel... so I sometimes try to sneak in a reference to one of them... this helps us understand how the Living Word... applies to today's world...

Our first reading from 1 Kings tells the story... of Elijah calling Elisha to be the prophet to replace him... Elijah finds him in the field... plowing... *and Elijah came up behind him... and threw his mantle over him*... it's like... *Tag... you're it*... we don't know how much time passed by... we don't get much insight into Elisha's internal monologue... how he discerned it all... but he ran after Elijah... and said... *wait a minute... let me go say goodbye to my parents*... and Elijah realized... *what have I done... breathe... take some time... wrap up any loose ends*... so Elisha did... and he burned some bridges while he was at it... to help ensure that this new prophet thing had to work out for him...

UCC Pastor Andrew Nagy-Benson writes... to proclaim the choppy mantle-passing from Elijah to Elisha... is to illustrate a human response... to a divine charge... we stutter...

we pause... we wonder... sometimes we weep... but our proclamation doesn't end there... like Elijah and his successor... we know the tenacity of God's call... the faithful may meet the limits of their energy... but they also meet a God who helps them to claim... and reclaim the "yes" that fuels... and refuels their work... like Elijah and Elisha... we learn... and relearn... that handing ourselves over to God is a most liberating and meaningful enterprise... it turns hesitant servants into channels of grace...

Both Elijah and Elisha are called by God... and both hesitate... such hesitation seems not to signal a lack of faith... as much as an awareness of the uphill climb we all make... we ask... am I good enough to do this... am I really called... is this something I just dreamed up... such questions are neither faithless... nor without merit... they are authentic expressions of wonder... and we answer... *I will... with God's help...*

Two years ago... Joel and I joined my daughter and son-in-law in Puerto Rico... for a visit... I had discovered... before we even left Michigan... that not too far from where we'd be staying... was the longest... highest... zip-line in the world... I had never been on one... but thought... *If I'm ever going to do it... might as well be the longest and highest...* so I started planting seeds... telling others of my intentions...

Well... the morning arrived... and we headed off into the mountains of Orocovis... almost seventeen-hundred feet above sea level... and as our little car continued to climb up... up... up... on winding... curving roads... the kind you don't want to look down over the edge... my resolve began to go down... down... down... I thought... *How can I get out of this...* I thought... *What will I say when all those people ask me how it was...* I thought... *I never should have said a thing...* I was still discerning... still trying to decide...

But we got all harnessed up... and climbed to the top of the launch tower... I guess I could have changed my mind even then... but thought I was past the point of no return...

I was the first one in my group of seven to go... and as I lay down in the harness... my heart was pounding... and the guide asked me if I was ready... I said Yes...

They do this thousands of times... and have probably learned to smell fear... because he asked me again... *Are you sure...* this time... almost at the same time... I said a prayer... and said *No...* and he pushed me off... and in that nanosecond of transition... the fear of death... turned into wonder and exhilaration... and I experienced an unprecedented freedom... flying at 50 mph... a thousand feet above the forest floor... along a 1.57 mile zip-line...

In our reading from Galatians... we hear about another kind of freedom... to which we are called... that it is for freedom... that Christ has set us free... but it is not... it is not... it is not... the same freedom we celebrate this Thursday... the 4th of July... the freedom to which we're called... transcends every label or boundary... we can imagine or try to apply... the freedom to which we're called empowers us to become slaves to one another... where the whole of God's law is summed up in a single commandment... *You shall love your neighbor as yourself...*

We are freed in Christ... 1 Corinthians [10:23-24] reminds us that while all things may now be lawful for us... not all things are beneficial... not all things build us up... right... the Holocaust was legal... while hiding Jews was criminalized... slavery was legal... while freeing slaves was criminalized... segregation was legal... while protesting racism was criminalized... so just because something is legal... doesn't mean that it is moral... because when we use our freedoms as an opportunity for self-indulgence... we bite and devour each other... and if we set our faces towards Washington or the southern border... that's what we see going on...

Those who come seeking asylum... seeking safety... seeking freedom... especially for their children... must have discerned... they have let go of all the things in their lives... all the attachments to place... to home... and to identity...

Those who resist them... are attached to other things... like money and power and fear... and who takes away the freedom for which Christ has set us free... we do... from ourselves and from each other... because we want to go back to the fleshpots of Egypt... to the good old days... which are gone forever... but there's an awful lot of energy that's exerted trying to restore them...

Amy Oden... Visiting Professor of Early Church History and Spirituality... at Saint Paul School of Theology in Oklahoma City... wrote... we recognize the need to justify our views... prove we are right... defend our faith... but we don't stop there... we also have the impulse to attack... to show how that person is wrong... misguided... even unfaithful... if we have structural or institutional power... we may move to shut them down and... *command fire to come down from heaven and consume them*... figuratively if not literally... if we have military or political power... we may use it to harm and punish... it's no surprise... then... that James and John seem eager to punish the Samaritans for their refusal to receive Jesus... they appear pretty confident... offering to command fire to come down and consume these knuckleheaded villagers... add to that their previous argument about who is the greatest... and maybe James and John are simply eager to project their own authority...

As they were going through Galilee towards Jerusalem... someone said to Jesus... *I will follow you wherever you go*... and Jesus challenged him... *if you follow me... you'll be rejected as I am... and will not be received anywhere... and will have no place to lay your head*...

To another... Jesus invited... *Follow me*... but he said... *Lord... first let me go and bury my father*... was the father already dead... or was this man saying... I'll come in ten or

twenty years after he's gone... but Jesus answered... *Let the dead bury their own dead...* Jesus conveys a sense of urgency...

Another said... *I will follow you... but let me first say farewell to those at home...* and Jesus replied... *are you really as determined as I am... because when you put your hand to the plow... and look back... all of your furrows will be uneven...*

Elisha discerned... and hesitated... stuttered... wondered... and paused... because being a prophet... means that you can't be attached to partisan sides... it means being attached only to God... who wants us to be guided by the fruits of the Spirit... love... joy... peace... patience... kindness... generosity... faithfulness... gentleness... and self-control...

Elisha set his face towards his call... he burned the bridge of his livelihood... and fed others with it... when the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up... he set his face to Jerusalem... and was steadfast... resolved... determined... to let events unfold around him... and to him... even knowing that he would die... there had been a trajectory... and throughout his ministry... everything that he said... and taught... and did... had led up to this point... he had reached the point of no return... he is about to be pushed off the edge...

So by what process do we make decisions... how do we discern... do we go back and forth more times than we can count... weighing the costs... against the benefits... even when we believe in a God who is loving... and just... and transformative... when have we been similarly determined... and when we let go of all that holds us back... do we jump out of our nests... so we can fly...

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