

Sermon: Pentecost 14

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Isaiah 58:9b-14

Psalm 103:1-8

Hebrews 12:18-29

Luke 13:10-17

I have only one sibling... a brother... Steve is two years older than I am... a first-born... and as the first-born... he would be the inheritor... like Esau my father's blessing would go to him... and as many of us who have children know... first-borns get lots of blessings... many parents struggle over how to care for their first-borns... to do everything right... to not feed them too much or too little... not hold them too much or too little... not let them get too warm or too cool... after all... parents are new at this... first-borns may get the freshly painted nursery... the packages and boxes of unopened toys and clothes... their parents may rush to them when they cry... when they sneeze... when their breathing changes so slightly... that no one else would even notice... and by the time there's a second... or third... or sixth-born... many parents are like... yeah... whatever...

Some first-born sons... and daughters... cherish the blessing they receive... appreciate its value... and never take it for granted or depreciate it... or squander it... but others... like Esau... may give it up for a cup of soup... may sell it short... like selling a diamond for the price of spinach... only to regret that decision later on...

Colossians 1:15 tells us that Jesus is the first-born of all creation... the image of the invisible God... because in him all things in heaven and on earth were created... things visible and invisible... he himself is before all things... and in him... all things are grounded and hold together... God painted the heavens with galaxies and nebula for him... and gave his voice to prophets...

In a story from 1 Kings... the prophet Elijah is fed by an angel... he needs strength for his forty day journey to Mt. Horeb... to be with *El Shaddai*... the God of the Mountains... and when he arrived... he came to a cave and spent the night there... then the word of the Lord came to him... saying... *What are you doing here, Elijah?* ... and Elijah explained... that the Israelites had forsaken the covenant and killed the other prophets... much like some American prophets were killed... and El Shaddai said... *Go out and stand on the mountain... and I will pass by...* and there was a wind... and an earthquake... and fire... but God was not in those things... and then there was sheer silence... and it was when Elijah experienced the sheer silence... that he wrapped his face in his mantle and stood at the entrance to the cave...

You see... Elijah came to something that could not be touched... to something that could not be shaken... to Sophia... to Wisdom... to the Logos from which all things came into being... and so he wrapped his face in his mantle so that he would not see God... and perhaps... like those hearers who begged that not another word be spoken to them... he covered his ears... so he could listen with his heart...

The leader of the synagogue in today's Gospel didn't listen with his heart... he was in his head... he was indignant... that Jesus spoke words of healing to a woman who'd been bent over for eighteen years... the leader was... almost certainly... devout and well-intentioned... but the words that Jesus spoke were said when Sabbath Law said they could not be... and it's funny that in this and other Sabbath healing stories... no one's jaw seems to drop... or marvel at what Jesus has done... they're just annoyed about when he's done it... and this in itself speaks to an attachment to the letter of Law... instead of to an invitation to the Spirit of the Law... this attachment appreciates the Law... as in *increasing it's value*... and depreciates the working of the Spirit...

It seems as though the synagogue leaders... and the Pharisees... had a hard time making the connection between what they said they believed... and what they did... they appreciated belief and depreciated behavior... and many people today... in spite of

the Two Great Commandments... and in spite Jesus' point in the Parable of the Good Samaritan... when the lawyer agreed that it was the Samaritan who acted with mercy... and Jesus said: Go... and do likewise... too many people today... myself included... struggle with how to let go of *orthodoxy*... right belief... and embrace *orthopraxy*... right action... that struggle is certainly embodied in our current political cycle... in fact... I had a message on our outdoor sign a few weeks ago that said: *How we behave matters more than what we believe*... and we got an email from someone who took great offense at that...

When we die to our old selves in our baptism... when we are re-born from above in Spirit... as Jesus said to Nicodemus... when we reject the notion that it's all up to us and experience our place in the body of Christ... when we transcend the boundaries of Law... and are led by the Spirit... what remains is what cannot be shaken... we receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken... and each and every one of us becomes first-borns...

In her commentary on today's passage from Hebrews... New Testament Professor Amy Peeler says: What's most striking... is that the author associates this assembly *with the* first-born... one might expect the author to describe this assembly as belonging to the first-born... a term he has used to describe Jesus... but instead... this is an assembly made of up first-borns... and his use of the plural grabs our attention... usually... it falls to only one child in a family to be the first-born... but here... those who come to the city of God can all be afforded the honor of being the first-born... Esau was willing to give up his rights as the first-born... but the readers of Hebrews approach the mountain where all retain that identity... and the incumbent rights that go along with it...

But it may take some time to adjust to those rights... have you ever noticed... for example... that when there's a construction zone on the highway... and orange cones on each side of the car narrow the roadway... or maybe if we're caving... and going through a tight space... or maybe browsing in a second-hand shop where the tables are

really close together... or maybe we're entering some unfamiliar theological or emotional territory... when these things happen... we slow down... we look around more carefully... get our bearings... try not to go off the road... or hit anything... or get stuck... or knock anything over...

The Law can be like that when we're legalistic... it can wedge us in... paint us into a corner... keep us from doing God's work... it can make belief seem important than behavior... but today's Gospel is one of liberation... it's one that invites us to... encourages us to... gives us confidence to embrace and use the extravagant gift of free will that we have been given... for good... to lift our voices together for justice...

But we must be like Elijah... we must listen for the silent Word of God... instead of the monkey-mind chatter of the world... and we must remember that there are some things which we know to be true... but which cannot be touched or seen or heard... like the righteousness of Abraham... or trying to describe to a blind person... the crimson color that bounces off the clouds in a spring sunset... or signing to a deaf person... what a symphony sounds like... or that all citizens have the right to vote... to a living wage... to be treated fairly by the police... to equal pay for equal work... and to be respected as we have vowed to do in our baptisms...

And we must remember... there will be some who will project the narrowness of their own experience onto our understanding of God... who will use the Law to deny healing for others... even when the Spirit is begging us to do something about it... I think about four-year-old Omran Daqneesh... whose home in Aleppo was destroyed... and whose picture... sitting in the back of an ambulance... covered in dust... blood on his forehead... in shock... broke my heart... like the woman in today's Gospel... there are many children of Abraham around the world... who have been bound by the Satan of accusation and division for too long...

To what will we look... what can we touch... how will we use our free will and listen for the sheer silence of Spirit... to Wisdom... Sophia... and the Logos... to what we know to be true... as we escape from narrowness into liberation...

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