

AUGUST 9, 2009
PENTECOST 10
“Live in Love”

Let us pray: Tender-hearted God, teach us, as your Word from Ephesians encourages us, to “be kind to one another, tenderhearted and forgiving,” even in the most challenging times when we encounter bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander. Teach us to “live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.” Let this be our fragrant offering to you. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

I’m drawn today to one of my favorite stories in the Old Testament, one I learned—and as I’ll describe later—has remained central for me in understanding what I like to call God’s “underwhelming” presence in our world and in the life of God’s faithful.

I find it a wonderful story, but one we need to see in its larger context and particularly the previous 18th chapter of I Kings in which Elijah’s continuing

confrontation with King Ahab and Queen Jezebel had led to the great competition of the gods on Mount Carmel in which, remember, Yahweh's sole remaining prophet, Elijah, had stood up against the 450 prophets of the god Baal and how both sides had sacrificed a bull and laid it on the wood of the altar and then called on the name of their respective god to consume the sacrifice with fire. The scene is almost comic, as the 450 prophets of Baal all call on their god's name from morning until noon, crying "*O Baal, answer us!*" But there was no voice, and no answer as they "*limped about the altar,*" I Kings says. Until at noon Elijah the sole prophet of Yahweh mocks them saying "*Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.*"

His teasing only made the 450 prophets of Baal rant and rave all the more to their god, but the text says, "*there was no voice, no answer, and no response.*" And so it's

Elijah's turn who carefully prepares his sacrifice and then—in mockery of Baal's prophets, douses the whole sacrifice including the wood with water—not once, not twice but three times. And then he simply prays to Yahweh:

O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.” And, of course, as the story goes, the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt-offering (‘holocaust’ is the Hebrew word) and all the people fell on their faces and confessed: *“The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God.”* Elijah—or better—Elijah's God had won the day, had won the battle of the gods in convincing style—and Elijah's way of sealing the triumph was to order the people to slay all 450 prophets of Baal. *“Do not let one of*

them escape,” he ordered—not exactly a heart-warming way of celebrating his victory would you say?

The immediate aftermath of all this violent blood-letting was that King Ahab went and reported all this to Queen Jezebel who sent a messenger to Elijah threatening: *“So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them (meaning her slain prophets) by this time tomorrow!”* And Elijah, like any sensible person, took off in fear of his life. The text says, *“Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life”* and so, finally, we reach the point of the beginning of today’s OT text with Elijah resting under the shade of a solitary broom tree out in the midst of the wilderness, scared but mainly feeling sorry for himself, begging the Lord to let him die. *“It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.”* You see, Elijah, God’s mighty prophet, hot after his great victory over the prophets of Baal, celebrated by his blood-

thirsty slaughter of his opponents, now inexplicably finds himself ‘on the lam,’ in the depths of despair, absolutely exhausted, wallowing self-pity.

I can’t help but ask: “What made Elijah think he was any better than his ancestors in the first place?” Who did he think he was? Apparently it isn’t only an American self-conceit that “progress” is somehow our birthright, that every day in every way we’re getting better and better, and that each generation is guaranteed to “have it better” than the preceding one. As someone who’s studied history—including church history—let me assure you that this sense of superiority we carry around concerning all that’s gone before us that often calls itself “progress” is bunk, especially if it deludes us into thinking that we are in some sense “better” or “smarter” or more “God-fearing” than those who’ve gone before us. Elijah suffered from delusions of grandeur coming down from his great religious “high” on the mountaintop, which not incidentally may

well have helped fuel his brazen act of violence against the prophets of Baal. It's an old and sad religious story.

But to return to the story. Having uttered his desperate prayer to Yahweh, "*O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors*" Elijah, exhausted, falls into a deep sleep under the shade of the broom tree until an angel—a messenger of God--awakens him and bids him "*Get up and eat*" for there at his side had appeared out of nowhere "*a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water*" and he ate and drank and lay down again. A second time the angel bids him to get up and eat and in the strength of that food the prophet journeyed for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

But, as the story continues beyond today's reading, it's clear that Elijah still hasn't gotten over his egotistic feeling sorry for himself, for once he reaches Horeb the word of Yahweh comes to him asking, "*What are you doing here, Elijah?*", a

rather strange question we might think since we assume that it's God's angel that had directed Elijah to this place. But Elijah's answer reveals that he is still absolutely full of himself and of his own sense of grievance as he blurts out "*I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life to take it away.*" Do you hear what Elijah is saying in his whiny voice? God, I'm about all you've got left, and look how you're letting me be treated. Is this any way to treat a loyal prophet?

I don't know about you, but there've been times when I've felt this way as well, especially in those times of some mountaintop experience that's been accompanied by a feeling of personal success and self-congratulation but then is inevitably followed by descending from the mountaintop experience into the valley of

everyday life's routine including its annoyances and problems, small and large. Lord, couldn't you find a way to treat your servants with just a little more consideration—just a little bit of appreciation—something befitting my efforts on your behalf? It's a common enough experience for us good religious folks.

And so what does God do with his complaining, full-of-himself prophet? I expect that Elijah thought Yahweh was about to give him yet another mountain-top experience like that on Mt. Carmel. For Yahweh orders his prophet, "*Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.*" Can you imagine Elijah's excitement? As the text goes on to say, "*Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord,*" "*but*" the text says contrary to Elijah's and our expectations, "*the Lord was **not** in the wind; and after the*

wind an earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.” And Elijah went back by God’s direction to his prophetic calling—having met God not in the big, loud, extraordinary outbursts of nature that we—or at least our insurance agents--sometimes still call “acts of God.” But God’s “underwhelming” presence is revealed in the “*sound of sheer silence,*” what used to be translated in the old RSV as “*a still small voice*” —Eugene Peterson’s translation in The Message is “*a gentle and quiet whisper.*”

I still remember the occasion like it was yesterday. I was serving as a camp counselor at Lutherdale Bible Camp in southern Wisconsin the summer following my sophomore year of college and as it sometimes then happened we were plagued one particular week by some revivalistic, bible-thumping pastors from northern Illinois who night after night could be found arguing over the kitchen table with Pastor

Nelson Trout—later to become Bishop of the old South Pacific District of the ALC—and one of our all too few African American pastors. These self-styled evangelical pastors, I expect, thought Trout was too progressive on social and racial matters, not pushing the born-again “make a decision for Christ” agenda that has always struck me as a Baptist rather than authentically Lutheran understanding of faith and one’s role in coming to faith.

What I remember vividly is how one night around our closing campfire time of prayer—having experienced yet another hell fire and brimstone chapel talk by one of the evangelical pastors—I somehow found the courage to pray at the campfire that the “still small voice” of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ might be heard amid all the bombast and noise and theatrics and bogus emotionalism we’d been hearing that week. This from a callow and pretty timid farm kid from with a couple of college religion classes under his belt—but from a college

kid whose baptismal faith had been nurtured in him by his little rural community of faith, strengthened and tested in the caring community of one of our church colleges, and inspired by the like of pastors like Nelson Trout who dared to proclaim a Gospel that had something to say to the world of our day and didn't reduce the Gospel to a God so small that "individual decisions" were all God was concerned with.

In light of our reading from Ephesians, I guess what I was really doing was an example of that "speaking the truth in love" that serves to build up, rather than tear down, the body of Christ, "*words,*" as Ephesians says, that "*may give grace to those who hear.*" Take Ephesians words to heart, as we now stand just a week away from our last Sunday together, and as you as a congregation of God's saints face this upcoming interim time in which you'll be facing some difficult decisions that will test your patience with one another: "*Put away*

from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice....” But in place of those all too human behaviors, *“be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgives you.”*

“Therefore,” my brothers and sisters in Christ, *“be imitators of God, as beloved children, and **live in love**, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”*

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.