

Westminster Sermon – “Letting Go”

Sunday, June 19, 2016

Scripture: I Kings 19:11-15, Luke 8:26-39

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In our first scripture reading, I Kings 19:11-15, we encounter Elijah, who was a prophet to the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the 9th century BCE. Elijah is distraught, paralyzed by his fear, and hiding in a cave from the wrath of Queen Jezebel, who has made it clear she intends to take his life following the humiliating confrontation between Yahweh and the Canaanite idol god Baal which ended in the death of many Baal prophets. Rather than permit Elijah to die, Yahweh sends an angel to prepare him for Yahweh’s self-disclosure. The result of Elijah’s encounter with God is to become reenergized and ready to lead those who are attempting—against all odds—to be faithful to Yahweh. Hear now what the Spirit is saying to each of us.

11 He (the angel of Yahweh) said (to Elijah), "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; 12 and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence (a thin whisper). 13 When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 14 He answered, "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." 15 Then the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus;" Amen

The Psalter for today, Psalm 42 and 43, will be sung (by Deb Watts, by Reverend McGill). This ancient prayer may well have belonged to Elijah. It is a reminder that human life depends on God.

In our New Testament scripture reading, Luke 8:26-39, we are reminded that the battle which Elijah confronted in the 9th century between good and evil continues in the 1st century as Jesus encounters a man tormented by demons. The demons rightly see Jesus as a menace who will engage destructive forces and destroy them. It is the nature of Jesus’ authority to threaten inhumane and oppressive powers, sometimes directly, sometimes subversively. Hear now the Word of God.

26 Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. 27 As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. 28 When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me"— 29 for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) 30 Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. 31 They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. 32 Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. 33 Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. 34 When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. 35 Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were

afraid. **36** Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. **37** Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. **38** The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, **39** "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

The title of the sermon: "Letting Go"

Text: "Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'" I Kings 19:13b

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, thank you for the thin whispers of your still, small voice in each of our lives. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our minds be of sober judgement and acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Shortly after Peter and I were married in 1992 domestic inklings began to surface which surprised me as a "thirty something career minister." One that was particularly strong was the desire to prepare Peter a meatloaf dinner. I really wasn't sure from where this desire was coming from and why the desire was specifically to cook "meatloaf." What surprised me even more was Peter's response when I told him my plans and he, looking a little perplexed, told me he didn't like meatloaf.

This evoked strong feelings of disappointment within me. Again, I wondered from where this disappointment was coming, particularly because the feelings were stronger than the situation warranted. Then it occurred to me that meatloaf was my father's favorite meal and I remember how excited he would be when my mom made meatloaf for dinner. I am confident I fantasized, as little girls do, about someday preparing a favorite meal for my husband. It just never occurred to me it wasn't going to be meatloaf.

Yes, I have prepared Peter his favorite dish from childhood—his mother's baked chicken with cream of mushroom soup. Something we both enjoyed, but in all honesty it probably wasn't as good as his mother's and I didn't enjoy making it as much as I would have my father's "meatloaf."

I continue to be amazed at how much of our childhood we bring with us into adulthood—the feelings, the fears, the wishes, the hopes, the dreams. I believe it is essential to explore and to understand these sentiments because of the tremendous impact they have on the relationships we have with our spouses, children, colleagues, and friends.

Likewise, those religious childhood experiences and sentiments shape the development of our faith—our relationship to the One who created and redeemed us, whom we also call Father. Gordon Allport, in his book *The Individual and His Religion*, discusses a person's ability to explore one's sentiment. Allport writes, "The distinction between the undifferentiated and the differentiated sentiment is illustrated by two students' descriptions of their fathers. One writes 'Dad is a perfect father. He loves his family and his family loves him. He is looked up to by all in the town, highly admired. He is noted for his fairness and honesty. Fairness and honesty are Dad.'" Allport explains that this student's devotion to her father is marked by such abandonment that she has not taken a close look at his character. Or, if she has, she is denying what she doesn't like even to herself.

"Another daughter describes her father this way: 'He is somewhat unsocial, but dramatic enough to be pleasing in company, irritable, but not ill-natured, conscientious, hardworking, puritanical, timid in some

things, dogged in others...” According to Allport, *“This student is observant, critical, not merely abandoned in her admiration. Her view of her father, if more complex, is more realistic.”*

Allport’s study revealed that people with differentiated sentiment about their parents also tend to be more reflective and critical about their religion. It is not wrong to be sentimental about our parents or our religion. We all have feelings and attitudes that have been shaped by our experiences. However, it is healthier when we take a closer look at these sentiments and are open to change and growth.

Westminster’s Page Turners Book Study, a group initiated by Elaine Ryder in 1999 and led by Mary Jo Mathern-Jenkins today, will have their final book review this Wednesday. Since their inception these women have read 175 books. Last month, they reviewed Harper Lee’s *Go Set a Watchman*. Many of us remember the controversy around this book when it was published last year. Written before *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee refused to publish this manuscript until right before her death. In *Go Set a Watchman*, Atticus’ daughter Scout has grown up and returns home as a young woman. The perspective of her father has also matured during those years, presenting a more differentiated view than 9-year old Scout did in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Reverend MaryAnn McKibben Dana, Mary Caroline Mitchell’s daughter-in-law, who will receive the 2016 David Steele Distinguished Writer Award at the 222nd General Assembly in Portland next week, provided insight on Harper’s new book in her blog.

“Apparently this novel does not measure up to the near-perfection of Mockingbird. And perhaps more heartbreakingly, neither does Atticus. It seems unthinkable that a man who would single-handedly take on the Alabama justice system on behalf of an innocent black man would attend a Klan meeting, or denounce the Supreme Court who decided Brown v. Board of Education.

But I say: bring it on. Don’t get me wrong, Dana writes, I don’t delight in such a portrayal of Atticus and will likely read the book with a sick feeling. I condemn the sin of racism, collectively, individually and in my own heart. But I suspect 2015 America needs this Atticus because it gives us a glimpse into our own soul as a nation and encourages us to be more honest about our history, ourselves, and yes, our heroes whom we want to be perfect.

An Atticus as preserved in Mockingbird is so perfect as to be unreachable. An Atticus whose story straddles the two novels is like us. And in aspiring to be our best selves, we can be like his best self. When the heavy machinery of upbringing and personal comfort and culture grinds against what’s right, we can stand up. We can and we must.”

Elijah was not a prophet without flaws and when he found himself overwhelmed by the circumstances in his life, Yahweh came to him in a still, small voice with honest and sobering questions. *“What are you doing here, Elijah?”* In that moment, held in the presence of God, Elijah was able to let go of his paralyzing fear, to remember who he was and to whom he belonged. His thirst for the living God was quenched in the reassuring thin whisper he heard within and he returned on his way to speak truth to power and to advocate for those without a voice in his time and place.

Almost a millennium later, Jesus healed the man who was tormented with demons too many to name. He was given his life back, a right mind, sober judgement, and the power to become a disciple of Jesus Christ.

As our nation absorbs the reality of yet another mass killing last Sunday morning, a horrific act, triggered by demons too many to name: hatred, religious fanaticism, homophobia, and a confused sexual identity. Armed with assault weapons, this man and his demons terrorized innocent lives in a place of community. On this Father's Day weekend, we mourn this unspeakable loss and hold the families and communities of our brothers and sisters in our hearts and prayers.

In this time of honest and sobering questions, may we listen to the still, small voice of our God who brings wholeness out of terror, who restores our soul, and who empowers us to hold on to what is right. Amen.