

Lessons in Spiritual Formation – Brian Hartley

1 Kings 19:1-15a; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

Thirty years ago this spring I stood before the Oklahoma Conference to be ordained a minister in the Free Methodist Church. In many ways, I viewed that day as the end of a long process during which I had been interviewed, probed, and mentored to see whether I had the makings of someone fit for pastoral ministry. In other words, I thought that I was celebrating the culmination of years of hard work. But looking back now, it is clear to me that what I viewed as the end of a lengthy process was really but the beginning of a much longer journey of spiritual formation. For, in the thirty years since then, not only have I grown older but along the way I have been privileged to baptize, bury, and minister to countless individuals and families who have forever changed the way I think about God and the journey of faith. In short, what I thought of at the time as an ending was really only a beginning.

Today's texts all share a similar theme stretching from the story of Elijah, to the musings of Paul, and concluding with the wonderful healing narrative of the Gerasene demoniac. In each case, the individual involved believed that he had reached a terminus in life, only to be confronted by God with a very different understanding that opened up a new chapter in vocation. And, not only are these stories interesting artistically as a result of this epiphany but I think that they reveal to us something about the very nature of our life in God. That is, they tell us that what we oftentimes tend to reduce to an accomplishment, an event, or a destination, is to misunderstand what it means to follow Jesus. Instead, we are challenged to view our life, not as a series of achievements, but as an opportunity to move ever more deeply into the very heart of God. What we are provided with this morning are some crucial lessons, then, in spiritual formation.

No one had more reason to celebrate a lifetime accomplishment than did Elijah here in 1 Kings. Just prior to today's text he has routed 450 priests of Baal at Mt. Carmel. He, and he alone, had stood up to Queen Jezebel and her coterie of temple priests who had danced in a frenzy to produce a religious experience that would have made our student Vespers service pale in comparison. Their Baalistic theology of worship through self-expression whose canons, Eugene Peterson says, "are that it be interesting, relevant, and exciting—that I 'get something out of it,'" (The Jesus Way, 110), had run head-on into Yahweh and His demand that worship is not something we experience but something that we do, "regardless of how we feel about it or whether we feel anything at all," (Peterson, 111). On that day on top of the mountain, Baal was shown to be an illusion and Yahweh as the one true God. Elijah's willingness to stand in the gap was rewarded, the 450 priests slaughtered, and the elaborate Baal myth totally deconstructed.

But Queen Jezebel was a sore loser. Elijah had dared to defy the powers that be, those in charge as Ben and Ruth have reminded us over the last few weeks, and the prophet of God is

as good as dead. He decides to leave her jurisdiction in Israel and hightail it south of the border to Beersheba. In a rather short period of time he goes from being conquering hero to pursued fugitive. The journey that ensues covers close to a hundred miles and leaves him exhausted and ready to die. Twice he is fortified by heavenly visitors as he makes his way into the desolate Sinai on a pilgrimage that takes him from the heights of victory on Mount Carmel to the depths of prophetic desolation on Mount Horeb. At the end, he finds himself in a dark cave, which surely must serve as a symbol of all that Israel's greatest prophet had so far endured. And when he emerges from that cave to confront the God of Hosts he is accosted by wind, earthquake, and fire—"not unlike the thunder, lightning, fire, smoke and trumpet blasts that Moses met on this same mountain," (Peterson, 118). And, perhaps like Moses, he expected God to reveal Himself in a mighty peal of thunder and lightning (Exodus 19:19), much like the one that recently struck and melted the 62-foot "Touchdown Jesus" outside an Ohio megachurch—lighting up the sky all along Interstate 75.

But, instead, the revelation of God for which the great prophet has been longing comes in quiet inarticulate breathing. The Hebrew phrasing here, as Peterson says, "is tantalizingly elusive," (118)—*qol d'mamah daqqah*. The old King James had translated it as "a still small voice," which the NIV here renders as "a gentle whisper." God is not to be discovered in some chaotic frenzied ecstasy the writer seems to suggest, but in the bowels of nothingness—what the NRSV calls, "sheer silence." The climax of Elijah's story, you see, is not in the noisy victory on Mt. Carmel, but in the quiet vocational renewal discovered at Mt. Horeb. Elijah, like many of us, had thought that he had accomplished something in front of those 450 priests, but today's story reminds us that this is but prelude to the true revelation of God. This new prophetic understanding emerges out of the boundless nothingness of the Sinai desert to break forth in the silence of the God of All Creation who restores to Elijah his prophetic breath. Elijah, this man who lived life on the margins, not only challenges the powers of the world, but suggests an entirely different orientation towards that world run by the mighty and powerful and what truly counts in God's counter-cultural Kingdom.

In Galatians, we read of another man who, according to chapter one, was "advanced in Judaism" and "violently persecuting the church of God and trying to destroy it," (1:13). But, confronted by the same God in Christ on his way to Damascus, he, like Elijah, withdrew into the deserts of Arabia. This man, one Saul of Tarsus, had believed that accomplishment was to be discovered in meeting the demands of Torah—what gets translated here most often with the word, "law." A version of this was now being preached in Galatia by those sometimes called "Judaizers," provoking Paul to say at the beginning of chapter 3, "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" (3:1). Torah, he claims in today's passage, does play an important role in our journey of faith. He calls it here "our disciplinarian until Christ came," (3:24). The Greek used here, *paidagogos*, is the root for our English word, pedagogy, and comes from the experience that many wealthy young Greeks had of an older, wiser, male teacher who served to guide them through their education and prepare them for living out their calling in the adult world. One thinks immediately here of the philosopher, Aristotle, mentoring the young Alexander for his future role as world conqueror and benefactor of the Hellenistic way of life.

The key principle here, though, is that what Paul once thought of as the goal of life (service to the law) was but a preparation for the life of faith in Jesus Christ which was yet to come. Tutors provided a very important service in the ancient world. They helped to prepare their charges for what they would have to face as adults. But once one became a full citizen it became imperative that one move from the needs of childhood to the embrace of one's life's calling. Paul reminds the Galatians that they have now been baptized into Christ and, as such, have taken on the life of faith—a life in which racial identity, economic status, and even gender identification no longer are relevant. To continue to find one's primary identity through such markers is to mistake calling for privilege, the journey of faith for a string of accomplishments. And for Paul, this was no abstract concept but a calling to the cruciform life which would lead to his own martyrdom years later in Rome. One born to Roman citizenship and Jewish privilege voluntarily gave himself over to the margins of life when he discovered and embraced his new identity as "apostle to the Gentiles" and "servant of Jesus Christ."

But no one is better at highlighting the place of the marginalized than is the writer of Luke's gospel. Time and time again he uses as his main cast those who would have been considered outside the boundaries of God's grace. And no one is more isolated than is this Gerasene demoniac who is portrayed in today's text as naked and making his life "in the tombs." According to Jewish law, such a man was not to be looked at, let alone touched. And to further indicate just how far removed we are from Jewish respectability, the story moves next to swine herders—Gentiles who made their living off of meat that was considered unclean by the people of God. Jesus' entry into the narrative clearly shows that he has crossed numerous boundaries as the man's first words are, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" (Luke 8:28).

I think the key to understanding the power of this particular story is the contrast of the man's appearance at the beginning of the narrative with the characterization in verse 35: "they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind." In the course of a few words, the gospel writer manages to elicit for us the power of healing and transformation wrought by Jesus and the fear experienced by Elijah in our first lesson is here shared by the citizens of this Gentile territory—so much so that they ask Jesus to leave them (8:37). The restored man, however, thought that he had now discovered his lot in life—to sit at the feet of Jesus, to join him and his merry band of disciples. His healing had been accomplished and now he was to be afforded the opportunity to enjoy his newfound status as a disciple of the master.

But like Elijah in the first story standing in triumph at Mt. Carmel or Saul wrapping himself in Torah righteousness, this newly-healed man misunderstood his calling in life. He was not healed to enjoy the triumphs of basking in the accomplishment of a redeemed life with infinite promise; he was healed in order to return and to bear witness to the goodness and power of God. The end of the story, like so many of the Gospel lessons, is not the building of booths as the disciples had hoped in the wake of the Transfiguration so that they could live their lives in peace and harmony up on the mountain. No, Jesus says, our calling in life is to come down

from the mountain to bear witness, to proclaim, what God has done, is doing, and yet desires to do.

This worldview stands in stark contrast to much of what is preached and practiced in 21st century American Evangelicalism. Worship services in many of our churches bear more resemblance to the cutting-and-dancing priests of Baal than they do to the retreat into the wilderness to listen for the voice of God. In the midst of our “culture of distraction,” many churches simply wish to offer a bolder, brasher, more mesmerizing event to counter the bells and whistles of the secular culture. That is, we simply want to dress up a “Christian version” of our secular counterpart. We have no desire to preach the hard truth of a God who calls us to sacrificial service, what Dietrich Bonhoeffer labeled the “cost of discipleship.” We simply want to offer attractive “Christian desserts” alongside worldly ones in what the Canadian sociologist, Reginald Bibby, labels “religion a la carte.”

But today’s texts speak of something else—an entirely different orientation towards our life and God’s calling on it. Instead of spiritual experiences they call us to a life of Christian spiritual formation, that which the Book of Common Prayer labels “the process of allowing God to bring our ‘unruly wills and affections’ into order with what is healthful to our spirits and to the spirits and lives of those around us,” (David A deSilva, *Sacramental Life*, 2008). In his recent book, *Sacramental Life: Spiritual Formation through the Book of Common Prayer*, Dave deSilva calls this “the process by which Christ’s mind takes shape within us. . . it involves learning to love what God commands and to desire what God promises. . . it is to come to the place where to do what God wishes is our pleasure and desire,” (Introduction). Those of us who have grown up in the Holiness tradition recognize something of this language because it goes to the heart of what we have believed that salvation is much more “fully orbbed” than a get-into-heaven pass. We have traditionally preached, practiced, and believed that God is interested in all of creation, in all of us, and in all (not just part) of our lives.

Today’s scriptures tell us the story of three men who would have been considered rather peculiar in their time. Eugene Peterson says that Elijah “took the marginal way. He held no position, lived a solitary life in obscurity, appeared from time to time without fanfare and disappeared from public view without notice,” (*The Way of Jesus*, 125). He modeled the quintessential life of the prophets who, Frederick Buechner reminds us, “were drunk on God and in the presence of their terrible tipsiness no one was ever comfortable,” (*Wishful Thinking*, 74-75). Buechner goes on to say of Paul that “his mads were madder and his blues bluer, his pride prouder and his humbleness humbler, his strengths stronger and his weaknesses weaker than almost anybody else’s you’d be apt to think of; and the splash he made when he fell for Christ is audible still,” (67). He made plenty of enemies who “accused him of being insincere, crooked, yellow, physically repulsive, unclean, bumbling, and off his rocker,” (68). And yet, he was willing to set aside whatever pretensions he had in order to follow in the wake of the crucified Christ. Marginalized by much of the eastern church, beat up, shipwrecked, imprisoned, and hauled halfway across the Roman empire, he came to understand that the calling to follow Jesus was not a one time moment of salvation made on the road to Damascus, but a lifetime of

service and of making hard choices to become more like his master over the course of the rest of his life.

That is why this morning we need to come to understand that the good news is not about the absence of anxiety, but the realization that we are not alone. That is why we are not called to an everyday experience of spiritual ecstasy, but a growing trust amidst the whisper of a still, small voice. And that is also why we are not offered freedom from our bodily existence, but a growing sense of Christ at work within all of creation. This, my friends, is the true nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ which reminds us that God still continues to beckon us from the safety of our fearful hovels to the road that leads we know not where. Elijah, Paul, and the unnamed Gerasene demoniac demonstrate for us something of that life of faithfulness. All that remains for us is the choice of whether to join in their company.