

The Second Sunday after Pentecost
May 29, 2016
Proper 4, Year C, RCL

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1 Kings 18:20-21, (22-29), 30-39
Psalm 96
Galatians 1:1-12
Luke 7:1-10

The people said, "The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God." In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

This morning's reading from the Hebrew scriptures marks a significant turning point in the theology of the people of Israel. And it has important implications for us today.

Let's set the stage. This is the middle of the ninth century BC. It is the time of the divided Kingdom, with the northern kingdom being Israel and the southern kingdom being Judah. The capital of the southern kingdom is Jerusalem. The Temple and the Ark of the Covenant are in Jerusalem. The capital of the Israel is Samaria. When the northern kingdom seceded from their southern kinsmen during the reign of Solomon's son, Rehoboam, they set up alternative worship in Samaria so that they wouldn't have to go to Jerusalem to worship. Thus the northern kingdom was regarded as apostate by the southern Kingdom. (This is why in the Gospels, Samaritans are regarded with contempt.) There developed a syncretistic religious environment in Israel in which a number of gods were worshiped including the Canaanite deities. Of these the chief sky god was Baal who brought rain to make the land fertile. The corresponding earth goddess was Ashteroth who received the divine seed of rain and gave birth to life.

Ahab became king of Israel in the north in 869 BC. His wife was Jezebel. And now here comes Elijah a prophet of Yahweh, the god whose name is so holy, that the people called him "the Lord" rather than use the divine name. Elijah is sent by the LORD to call the people of Israel back to worshipping their true God, the God that brought them out of the land of Egypt, the God who gave them this land to live, in the God that loves them and desires them.

Baal was supposed to control rain. So Elijah challenges Baal by calling a drought. It is now three years later and no rains has fallen in all that time. And the question is which god can end the drought. Here is the text again:

Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel. Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." The people did not answer him a word. Then Elijah said to the people, "I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD; but Baal's prophets number four hundred fifty. Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the LORD; the god who answers by fire is indeed God." All the people answered, "Well spoken!" Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; then call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it." So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there

was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made. At noon Elijah mocked 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." Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come closer to me"; and all the people came closer to him. First he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down; Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD came, saying, "Israel shall be your name";

Notice that Elijah is reminding his audience that they are the offspring of Jacob whose name was changed to Israel after wrestling all night with God's angel at the river Jabbok. The LORD is their rightful God from the beginning.

with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD. Then he made a trench around the altar, large enough to contain two measures of seed. Next he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood. He said, "Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood." Then he said, "Do it a second time"; and they did it a second time. Again he said, "Do it a third time"; and they did it a third time, so that the water ran all around the altar, and filled the trench also with water.

The point here is that Elijah is going out of his way to make it hard for the fire to start.

At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said, "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." Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God."

You got to admit this is a great story. So what is the point? Yahweh is the true God. This is a major point of transition in the development of the understanding of God. When Abraham heeded the call of God to leave the land of his father and go to a new land, Yahweh was his God. When Moses meets God in the burning bush, the LORD is identified as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Every group or tribe or nation had their own gods. Yahweh was the God of the Israelites. The confrontation with Pharaoh taught them that not only was Yahweh their God, but he was stronger God than the gods of Egypt. Now on Mount Carmel the Israelites learn that the LORD is the only true God. If the LORD is God, follow him. Not just our god or the best god, but God, the only God.

This gives a new emphasis on the first two commandments, No other Gods. No idols. There is only one God. This God is Yahweh. This is the God who has led us from the beginning. We must be loyal to our God and not follow or worship any other. There are always contenders for our loyalty and worship: money, power, self-sufficiency, liberty, independence, honor, good reputation, security, nation, and so on. Even religion can be a false god.

This is not merely an abstract idea, but is the foundation of all dimensions of our lives. This is summarized by Ignatius of Loyola in what he calls “The Foundation.” I am going to paraphrase it a little:

Human beings were created freely out of love by God who desires to share God's life forever with us, if we will freely love God in return. The whole world which has been created by God is given over to humans to help us grow in our love response and so to fill this world with the order of God's love between individual people and between people and creation.

We should readily make use of all god's gifts of creation insofar as they do help us develop more as loving persons, but where some gifts stifle such a growth in love or cause it to be lost, a person must turn away from them and become free from them. As a result, in practice we must be free before all that has been created. For example, as far as we are concerned, we should hold in balance health and sickness, riches and poverty, honor and dishonor, a long life and a short life, and so on.

The only thing which moves us and the one choice which matters is the single notion of why we are created—to be able better to respond more fully in love to the love of God and to be able ever more fully to grow in that response.

According to this, our only criterion for making judgements about our choices is this: Does this help the growth of love in ourselves and in our world, or does it hinder that growth? How can I speak this truth in such a way that it can be heard as a gift and not as an attack? How can I take care of myself while taking care of others? How much should I spend on my family's welfare and how much on other people's welfare? These are always hard decisions. And the only criterion is does it draw me closer to God, other human beings, and the created world, or not? And if, as Ignatius suggests, this life is a school or training camp for love, do we see all the events of our lives as lessons or opportunities to grow in love? This person who frightens me or puts me off or annoys me—how might I love him or her? This other person who is not present and about whom my friends are talking—how might I love him or her?

Our God is the only true God. And God has a special relationship with us. And the only purpose we have been given by God is to love. If anything interferes with growing in love, we should get rid of it. Which brings us to the summary of the law enunciated by Jesus: “The greatest commandment is this: Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And the second commandment is like it: You shall love your neighbors as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Here's a wee poem from one of Alexander McCall Smith's stories. In it he speaks of human love and mentions its limitations. He also speaks of where love still has work to do in his own country. As you listen remember that the love we have been given is divine love and not limited at all. And where he says "Scotland" feel free to hear "America."

When I was a boy, not yesterday of course,
 When life, I thought, was a whole lot
 More certain than it is today,
 I made a list of those I thought
 Liked me as much as I liked them –
 For at that age we're loved

By just about everybody
 Whom we care to love; how different
 It is in later years, when affection
 Has no guarantee of reciprocation,
 When we may spend so very long
 Yearning for one who cannot
 Love us back, or cares not to,
 Or who lives somewhere else
 And has forgotten our address
 And the way we looked or spoke.

The remarkable thing about love
 Is that it is freely available,
 Is as plentiful as oxygen,
 Is as joyous as a burn in spate,
 And need never run out.
 And yet, for all its plenitude,
 We ration it so strictly and forget
 Its curative properties, its subtle
 Ability to make the soul-injured
 Whole again, to make the lonely
 Somehow assured that their solitude
 Will not last forever; its promise
 That if we open our heart
 It is joy and resolution
 That will march in triumphant
 Through the gates we create.

When I look at Scotland,
 At this country that possesses me,
 I wonder what work love
 Has still to do; and find the answer
 Closer at hand than I thought –
 In the images of contempt and disdain,
 That are still there, as stubborn
 As human imperfections can be;
 In the coldness of heart
 That sees nothing wrong
 In indifference to want, in dislike
 Of those who are different,
 In the cutting, dismissive
 Turn of phrase, in the sneer.

Love is not there, in all those places,
 But it will be; love cannot solve
 Every human problem, but it makes

A start on a solution; love
Is the only compass-point
We need to learn; we need not
Be clever to know it, nor endowed
With unusual vision, love
Comes free, at least in those forms
Worth having, lasts as long
As anything human may last.

May Scotland, when it looks
Into its heart tomorrow
If not today, see the fingerprints
Of love, its signature, its presence,
Its promise of healing.

Our God is the only God there is, the God who loves and the God who aches for us to love, too. And we don't care how many prophets of Baal there may be who say we are foolish or naïve or impractical. It happens that our God is the best God, and, it turns out, the only God. Wow!